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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
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Thesis

The Influence of Personal and Social Environment
upon the
Poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning

by

Edith Mortimer Boothby
" "
(B.R.E., Boston University, 1929)

submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

1931

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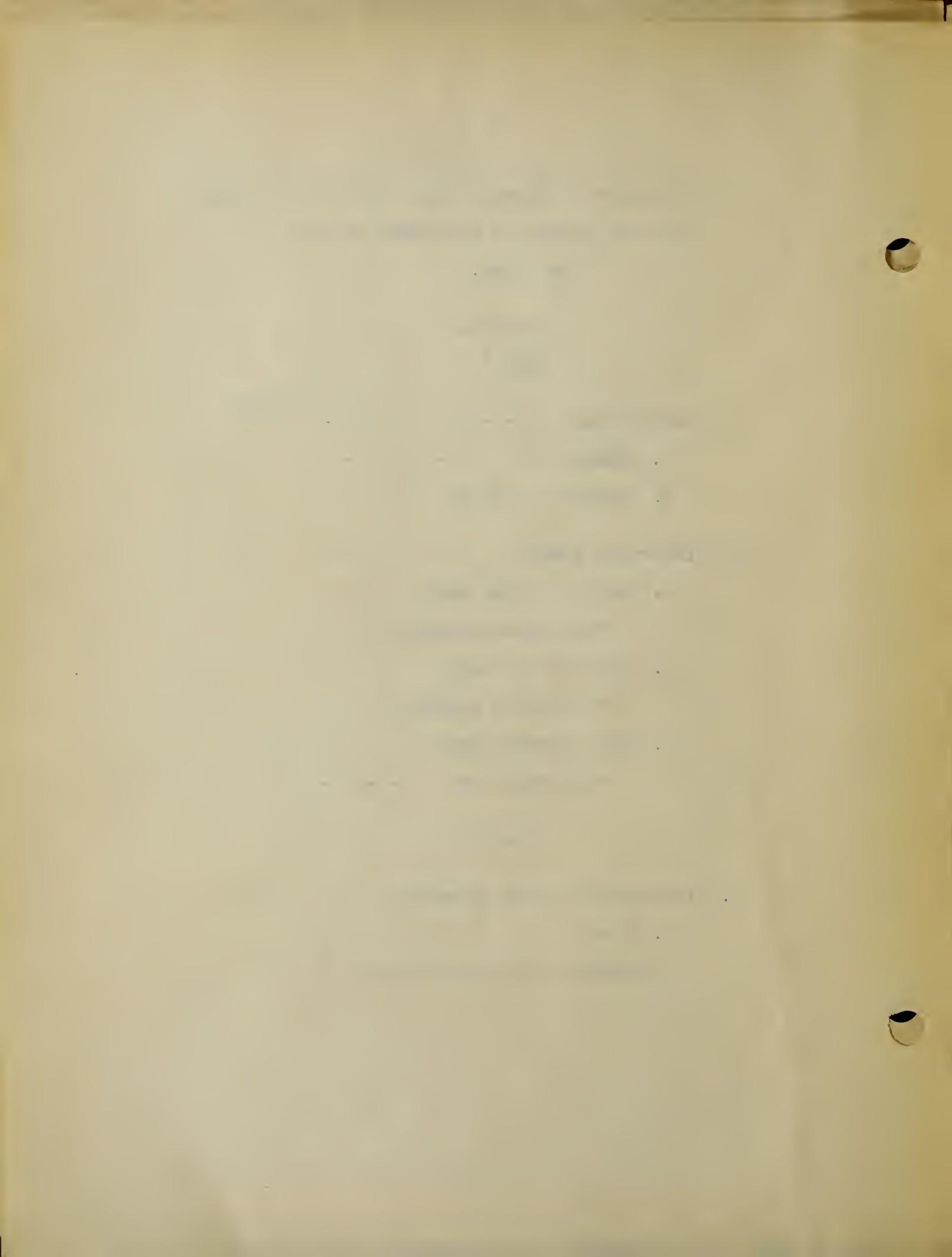
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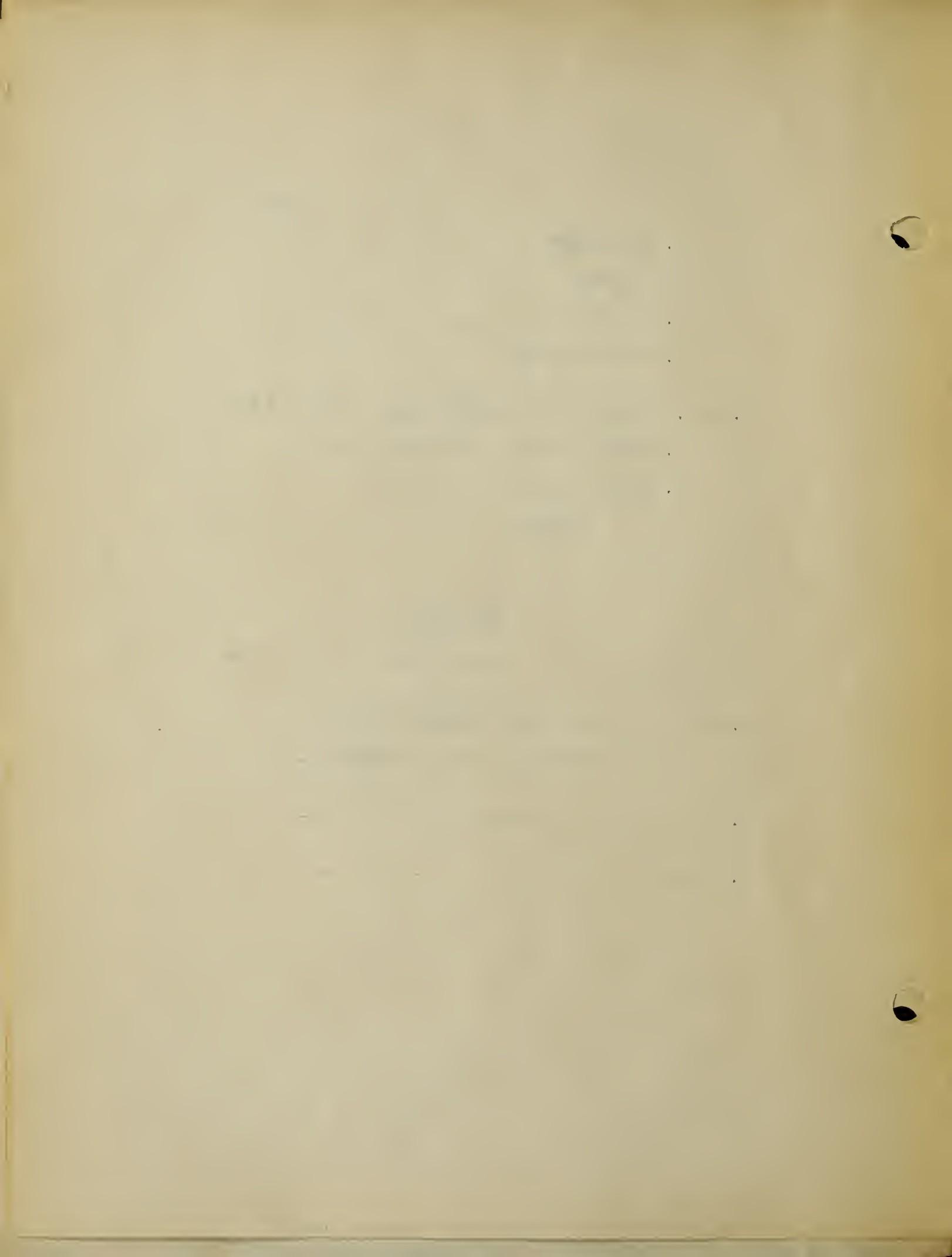
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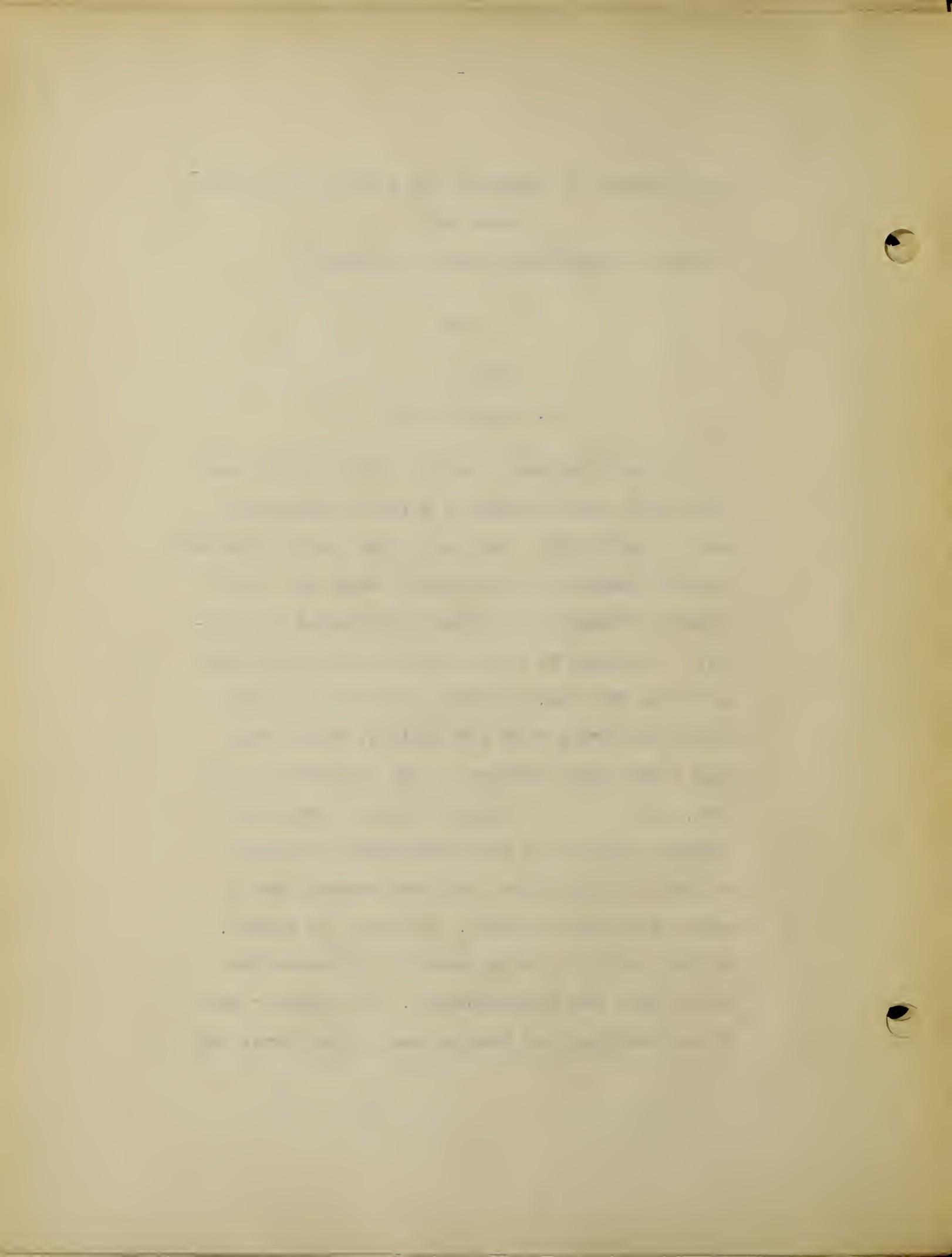


The Influence of Personal and Social Environment
upon the
Poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Part I

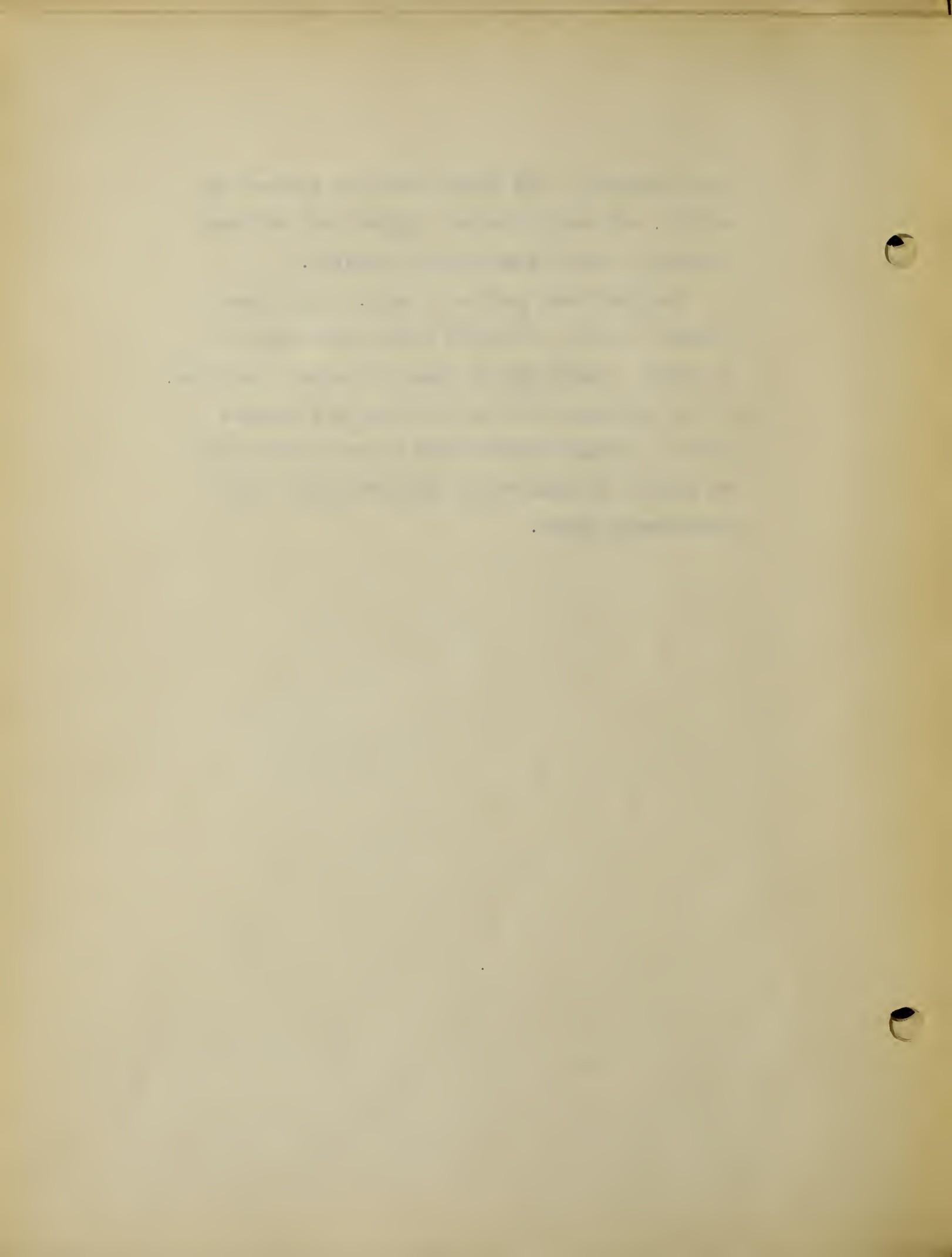
1. Introduction

In the nineteenth century both England and Italy were going through a period of changing social conditions. The conditions which Elizabeth Barrett Browning found existed among the lower classes of England and Italy influenced her poetry. It should be said that it also influenced her prose writing, but this discussion is primarily concerned with her poetry. There were only a few women writing in the nineteenth century, but early in this period Mrs. Browning's literary reputation was established. Her life had many difficulties, but the greatest was a severe physical handicap. She was, by nature, shy and retiring, which made it difficult for her to make new acquaintances. The greater part of her training and reading was in the Greek and



Latin classics. Her family could be classed as wealthy, and even after Mr. Barrett had suffered reverses at least comfortably situated.

Keeping these points in mind, it may seem unusual that Mrs. Browning became interested in the social conditions of these two great countries, but her personal life of suffering and mingled content doubtless contributed to her interest in the social problems which inspired some of her humanitarian poems.

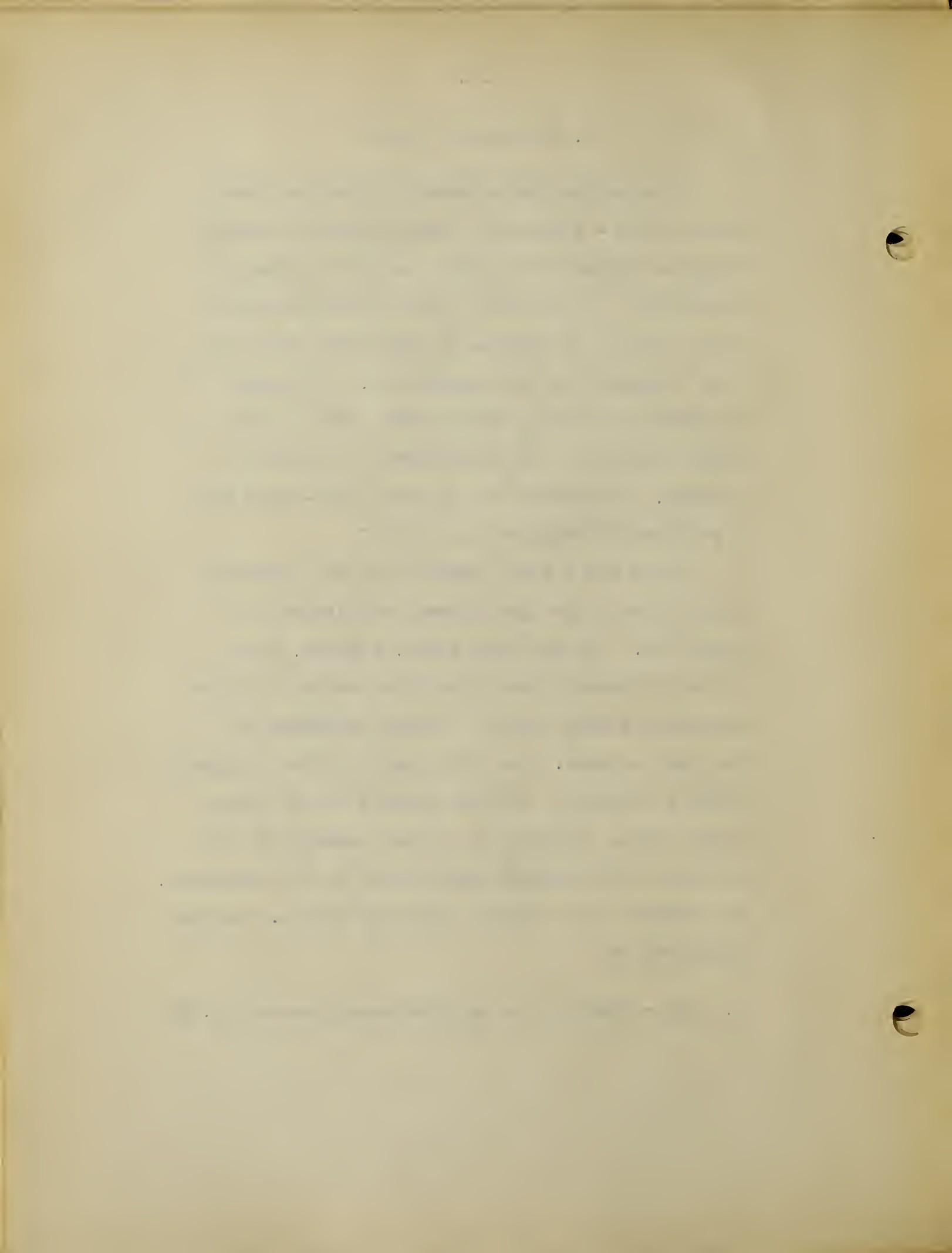


2. Historical Sketch

"The England which emerged from the great war of 1793 - 1815 was a very different country from the England of the days before the French Revolution. In all her history there has never been a period of twenty-two years into which so many changes have been compressed. Not merely in matters political and economic, but in all social matters -- in literature, in national feeling, in everyday thought and life--there was a profound alteration visible." ^{1.}

There was a great expectation for improved conditions in the agricultural and industrial situation. The next few years, however, were a sorry disappointment, for this period of reconstruction brought with it severe hardships for the poor classes. The first part of the nineteenth century brought in changed methods in the industrial world. Because of the new commercial connections which England established on the continent, she planned for a vastly increased output. England neglected to

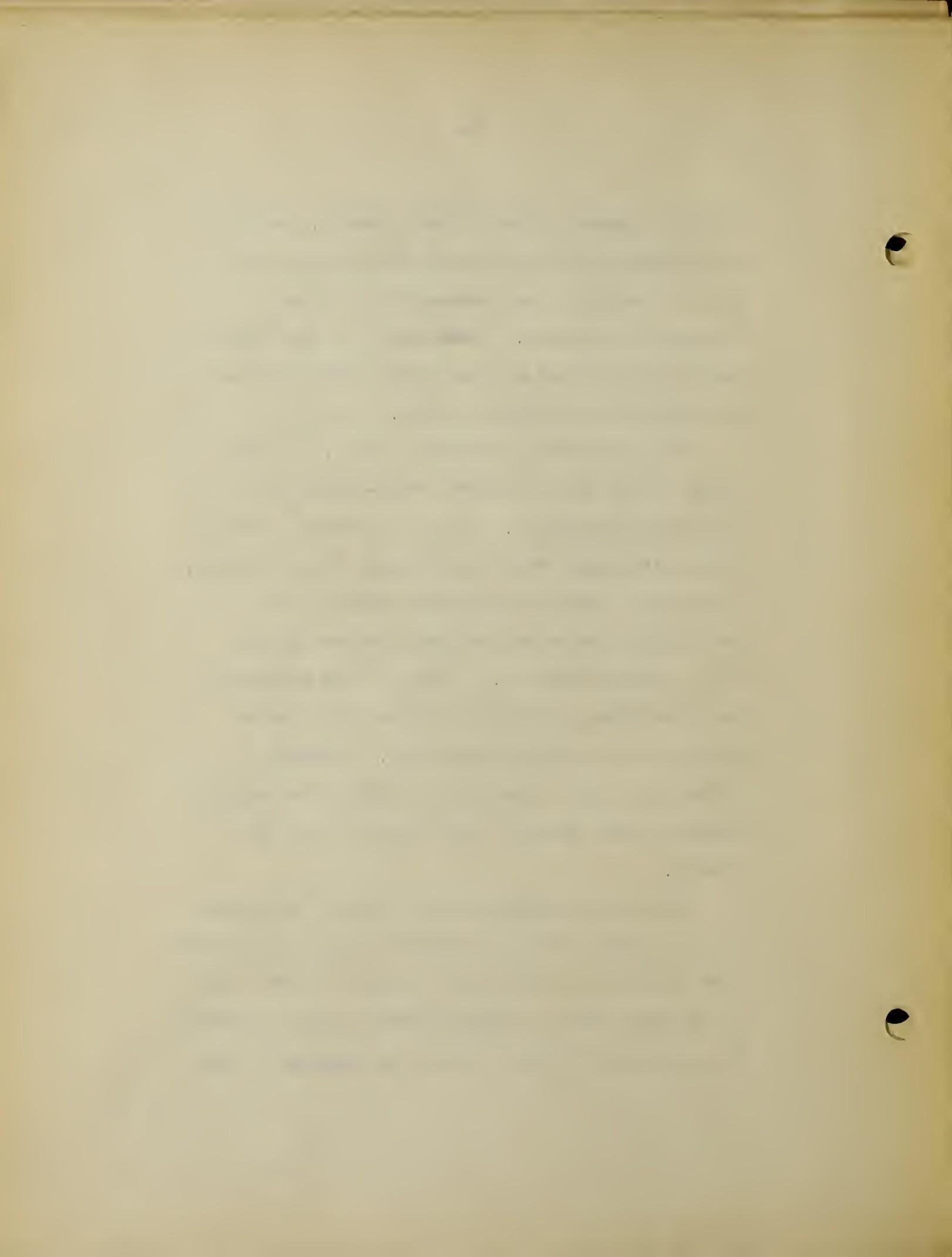
1. Oman - "England in the Nineteenth Century" p. 53



realize, however, that France, Russia, Spain, and Germany had been drained of resources and had no money for bare necessities, to say nothing of luxuries. Consequently, the foreign market was flooded and the goods either had to be sent back or sold at a loss.

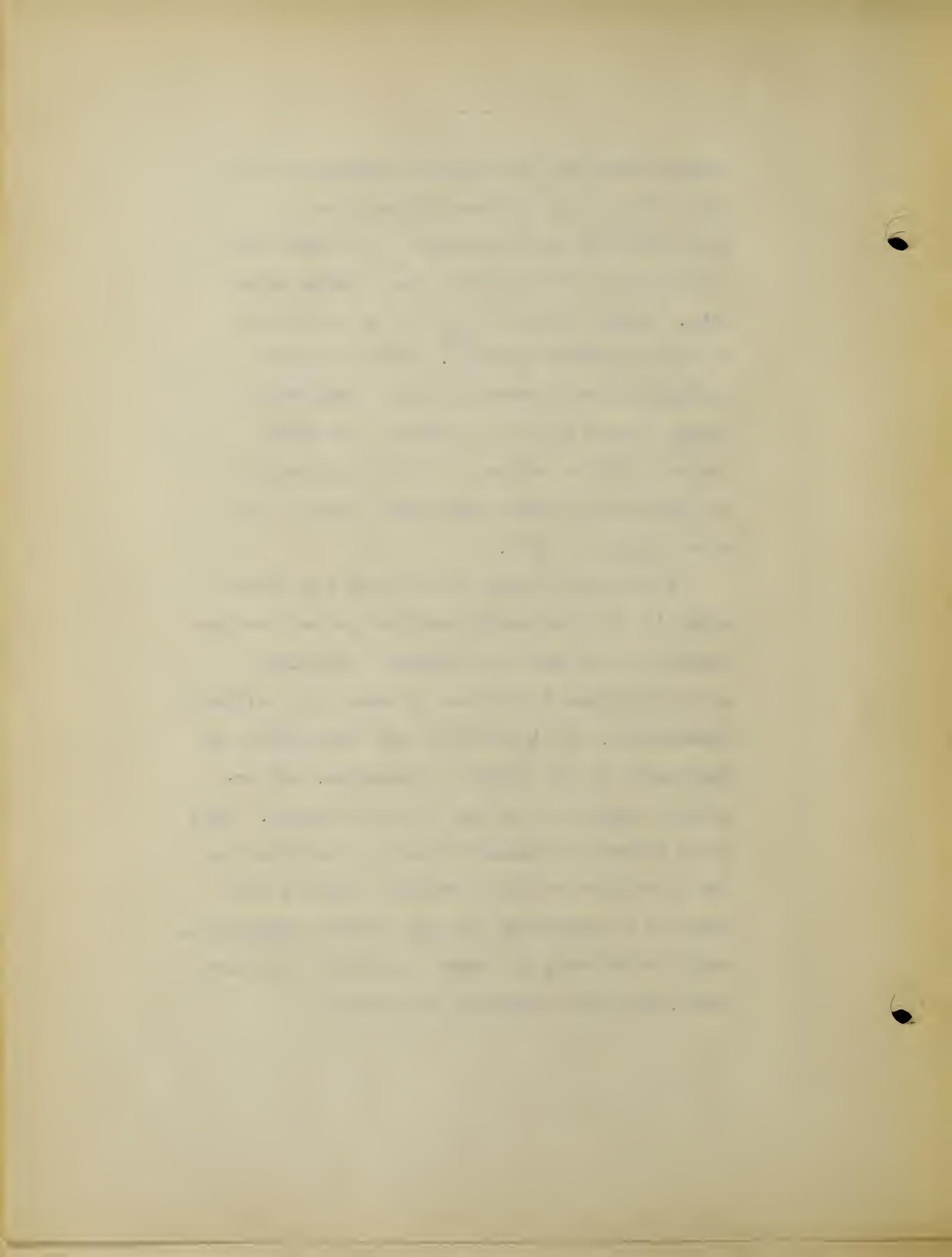
To supply this increased output, the old trades which had called for hand-labour now called for machinery. This, of course, transferred the labor from the homes to the factories. This change caused many social evils which, previously, had never existed, but now called for a reform movement. For the next few years the government, which had to deal with these social evils, was not competent. Reform, therefore, became the bone of contention between England's two parties, the Whig and the Tory groups.

For the next twenty years, after the Reform Bill of 1832, the only important topics in politics were matters of social and economic reform, such as the abolition of negro slavery in the colonies, the reform of the Poor Laws, the passing of the



Factory Acts and the gradual introduction of Free Trade. Two of these topics have a direct bearing on this paper. The abolition of slavery in the colonies was a moral necessity. Negro slavery could not be justified in the nineteenth century. Public opinion in England was ashamed that the institution should linger on in the Empire. The West Indian planters refused to abolish slavery on the plantations until they were forced to do so on August 1, 1834.

The second reform in which we are interested is the laws which Peel had passed for the benefit of the working classes. The Mine Acts prohibited the labour of women and children underground, and the Factory Act restricted the employment of the young in factories, and appointed inspectors to see to their safety. This brief survey of England's social conditions in the first part of the nineteenth century will serve as a background for any further discussion. During relatively the same period and a little later, what was happening in Italy?

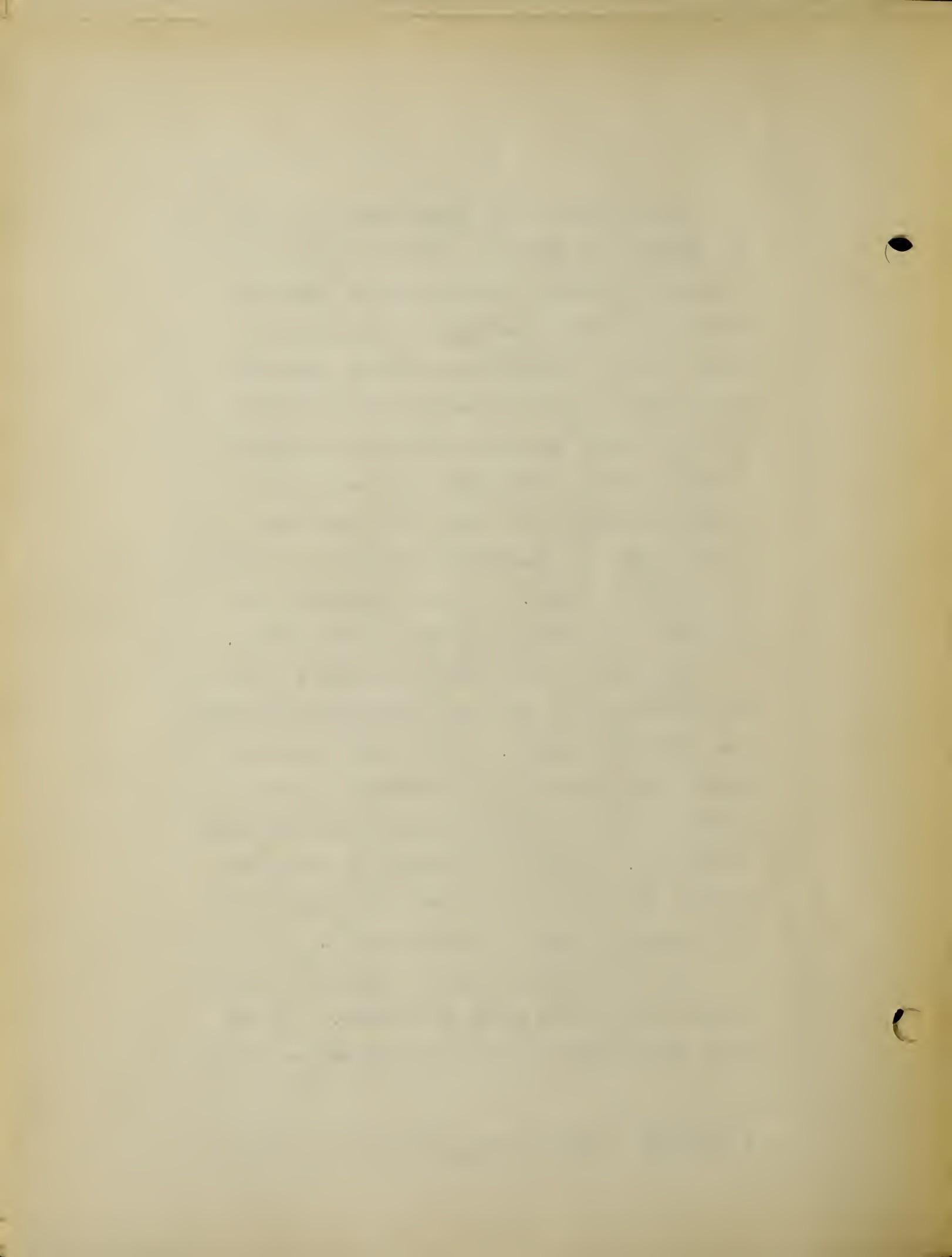


At the time of the French Revolution and the invasion of Napoleon, "Italy was still like a comedy of Goldoni, dukes enjoying taxes and mistresses, priests accepting oblations and snuff, nobles sipping chocolate and pocketing rent, while the poor peasants, kept behind the scenes, sweated and toiled for a bare subsistence."¹ Some of the rulers of the many separate provinces of Italy were influenced by the causes of the French Revolution and began to rule more wisely. Others continued with the old regime and made no move toward reform.

Napoleon in 1796 began his career in Italy and created out of the many independent provinces the Napoleonic States. After Napoleon's overthrow Italy returned to its former state of affairs and it was again divided among its petty sovereigns. Outwardly despotism had been re-established, but inwardly new ideas and aspirations were seething all through Italy.

After 1821 there followed a period of quiet, steady work for the cause of freedom. By 1831 open revolt began to appear but it was not until

¹ Sedgwick - "Short History of Italy" p. 361



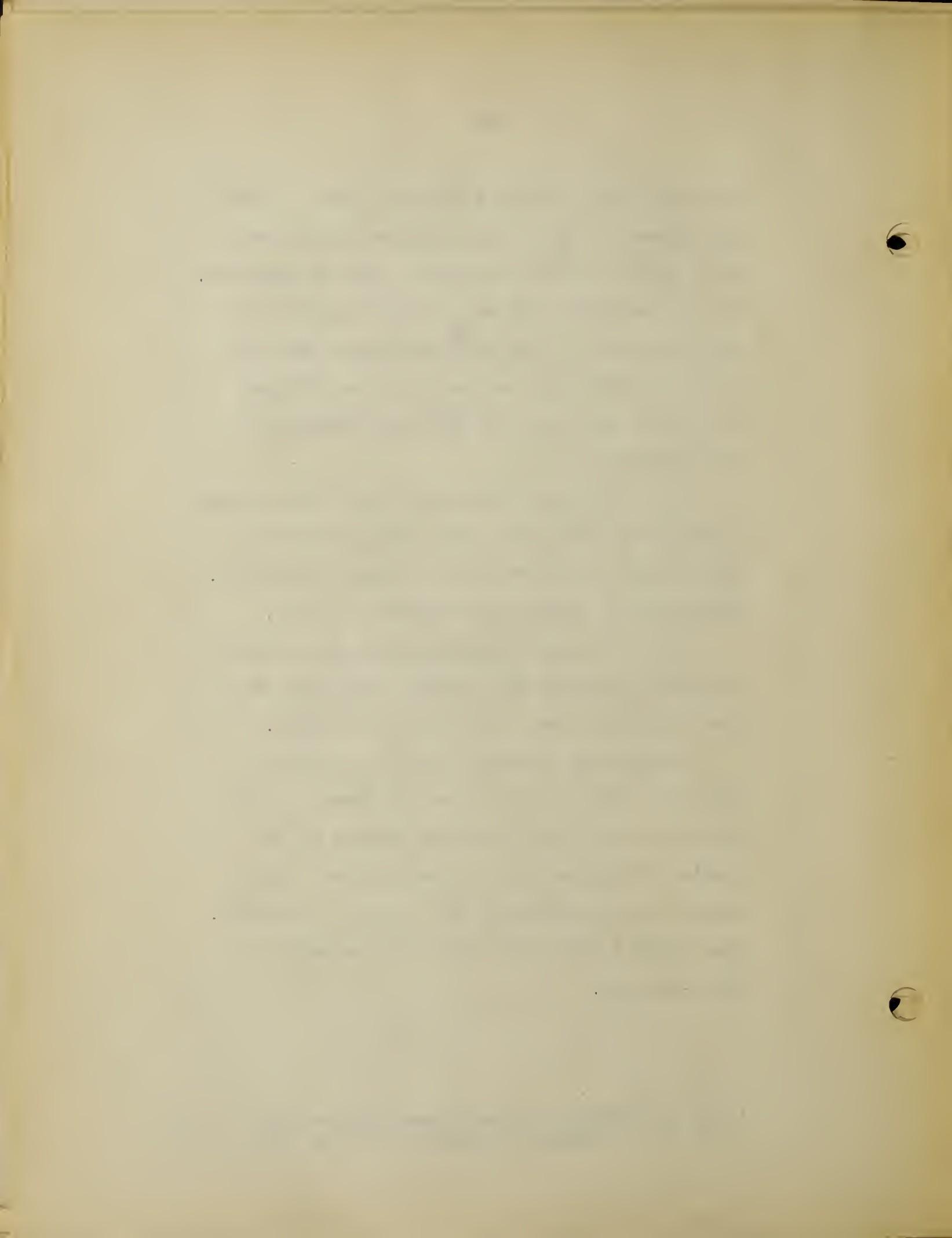
1848 that the revolution finally broke. "There was a general insurrection against the Austrian yoke, headed by Charles Albert, King of Sardinia. But the peninsula was not yet ripe for liberty; the insurgents in the various regions were full of local patriotism, and many of them dreamed of nothing but restoring the old republics of the Middle Ages." 1

They did not aid each other and their princes betrayed them for, of course, Italian liberty would mean Italian security and their expulsion. The Austrians crushed the movement in 1849.

Italy had many great statesmen who tried to secure her freedom, but to Garibaldi goes the most credit for the union of Italy in 1871.

Between the lines of Italy's history in the first part of the nineteenth century is the horrible picture of the social abuses of the Italian people who were thrown back and forth between petty sovereigns and stronger countries. They desired only what rightfully belonged to them--freedom.

1 Oman - "England in the Nineteenth Century"
Italian rising of 1848 p. 101 - 103

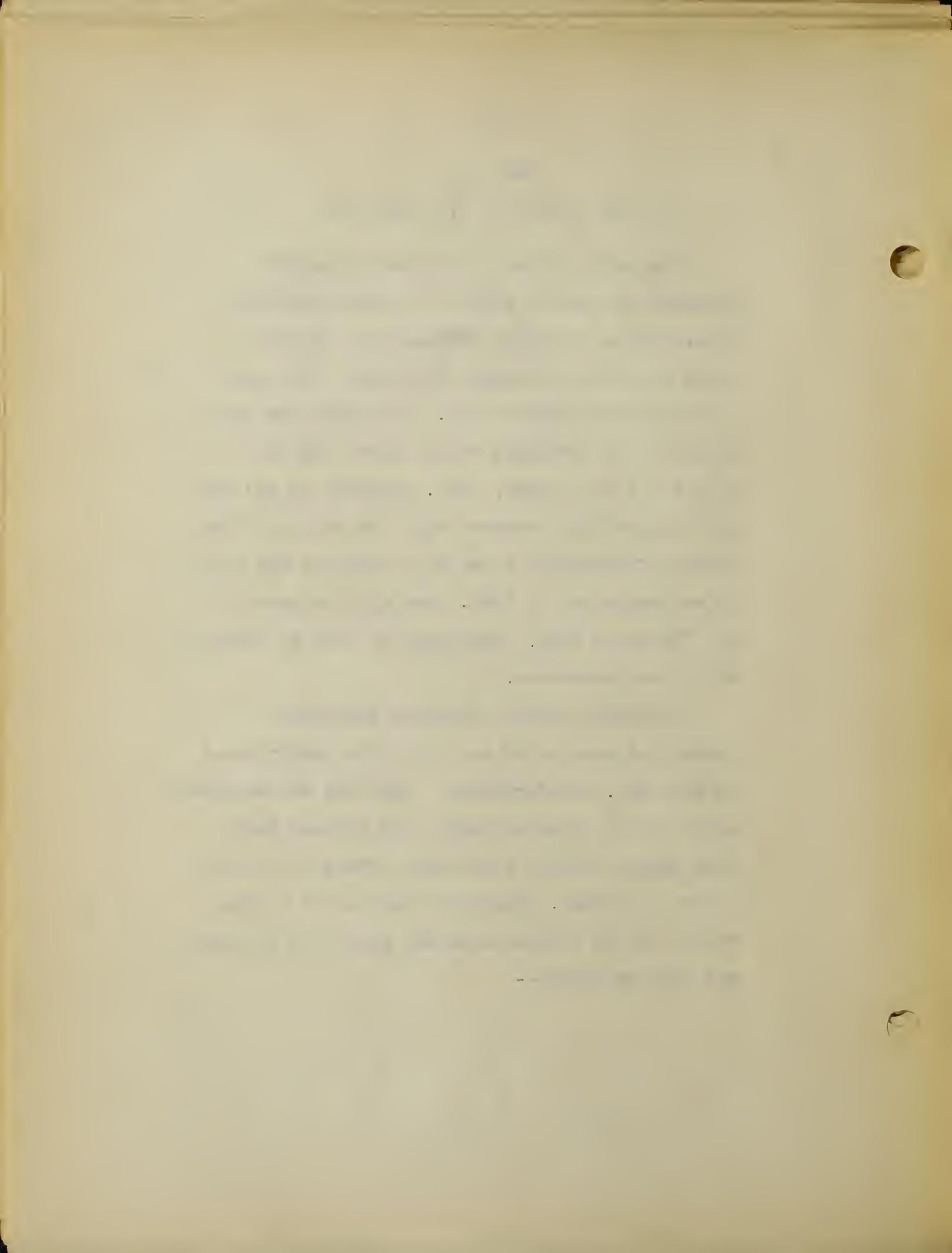


Part II

1. Life Sketch of Mrs. Browning

The date of birth of Elizabeth Barrett Browning has been a point of dispute among her biographers. Although arguments for several dates have been advanced, March 4th, 1809 seems to be the most logical one. This date was challenged by Mr. Browning who asserted that his wife was born in 1806. Mrs. Browning by her own words proves 1809 correct when she spoke of "The Battle of Marathon" as written when she was ten: it was published in 1820. She also referred to her "Essay on Mind," published in 1826 as "written when I was seventeen."

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was born in London and soon after her birth the family moved to Hope End, Herefordshire. Hope End is described as an estate of great beauty and without doubt this natural beauty cultivated within the child a love of nature. Elizabeth was one of a large family and as a child when she wanted to be along she says she would--

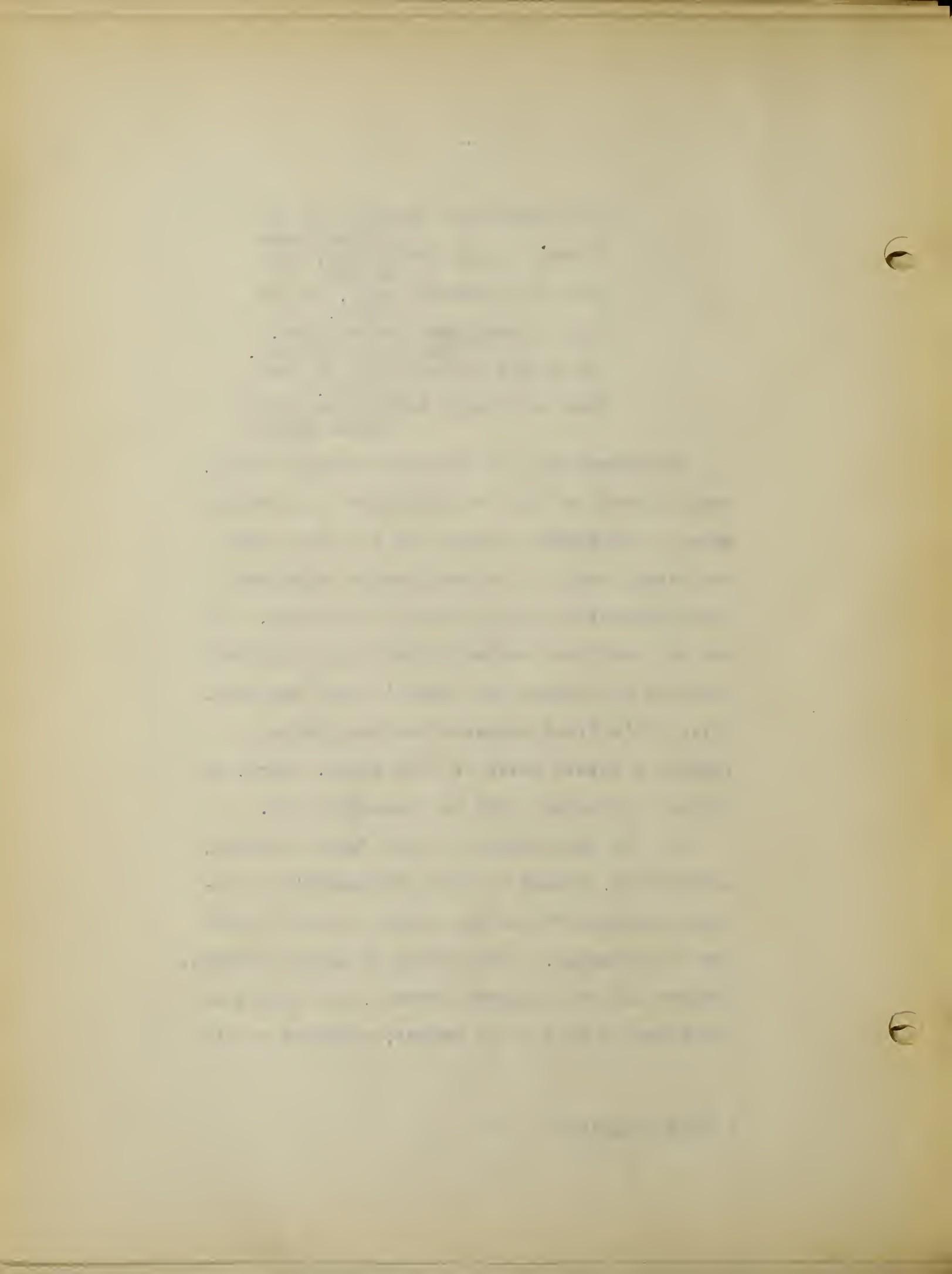


"Slip downstairs through all the
 sleepy house
As mute as any dream then, and
 escape
As a soul from the body, out of
 doors.
Glide through the shrubberies,
 drop into the lane,
And wander on the hills an hour
 or two,
Then back again before the house
 should stir."¹

Elizabeth was the father's favorite child, and he spared no pain to cultivate her intelligence. Elizabeth's mother was too busy with her large family to be very deeply concerned with Elizabeth's first efforts in writing. It was not until her mother's death that Elizabeth realized how tender her mother's love had been. Elizabeth's first pieces of writing we will discuss a little later in this paper. Here, we are more concerned with her personal life.

Of all the children in the family, Edward, her brother, seemed to share Elizabeth's childhood playtimes, for he was closer to her in age and intelligence. "Surrounded by happy children, companioned by a beloved brother, encouraged in her pursuits by a proud father, supplied by all

1 "Aurora Leigh"



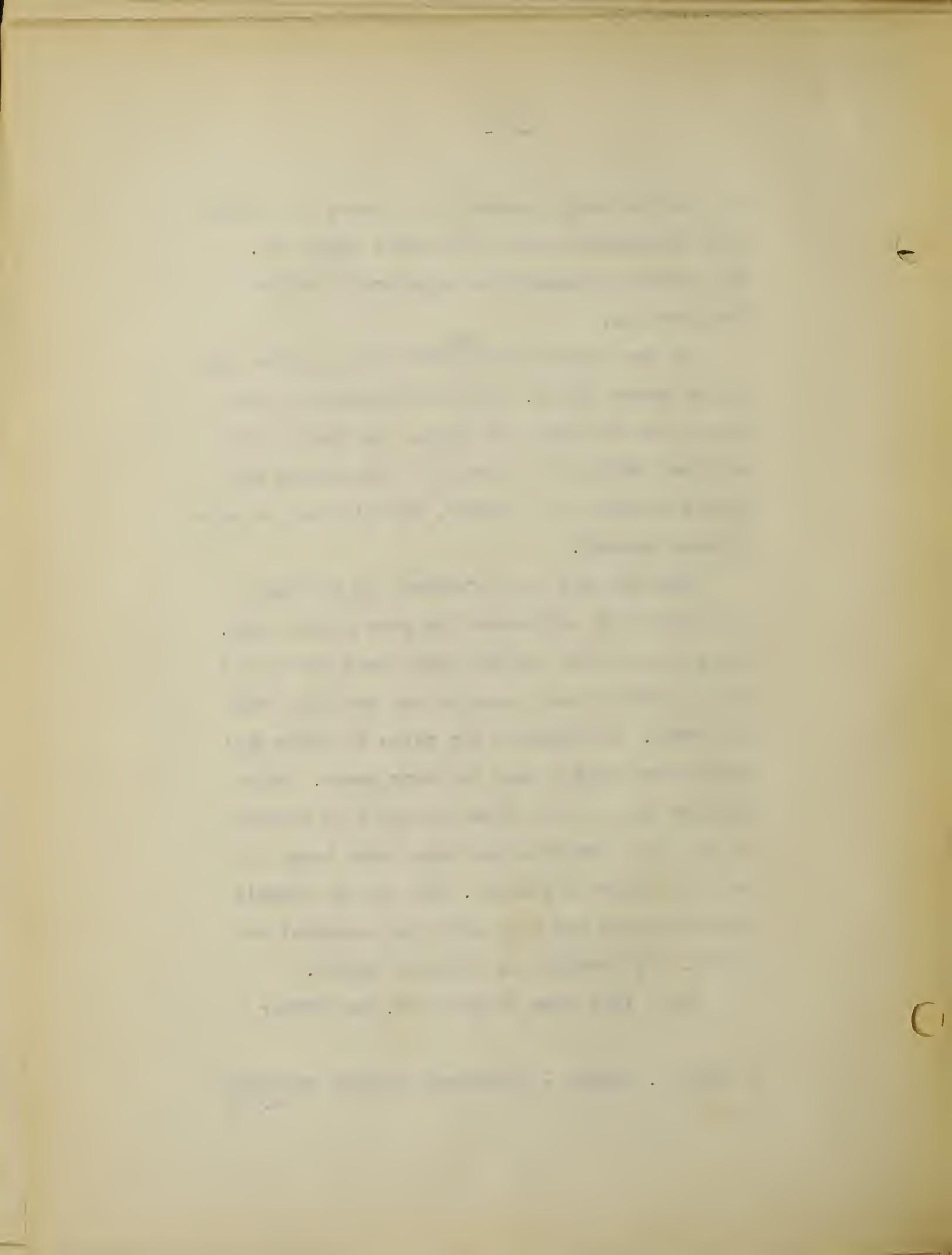
that wealth could procure, it is easy to imagine that Elizabeth's early life was a happy one. Her greatest pleasure was apparently derived from reading." ¹

So far Elizabeth Barrett's life is like that of any normal child, with the exception of her early love of Greek and Latin. She was a child with well-balanced interest in life around her. From this point on, however, her life may be considered unusual.

When she was about fifteen, an accident occurred which influenced the rest of her life. One morning while she was horse back riding the saddle strap became loosened and she fell from her horse. She injured her spine so badly that she was confined to bed for many years. This accident cut her off from the world of activity at just the time when she would have begun to take her place in society. She was an invalid for many years and even after her apparent recovery, she remained in delicate health.

About this time in her life, her father

¹ John H. Ingram - "Elizabeth Barrett Browning"
p. 18

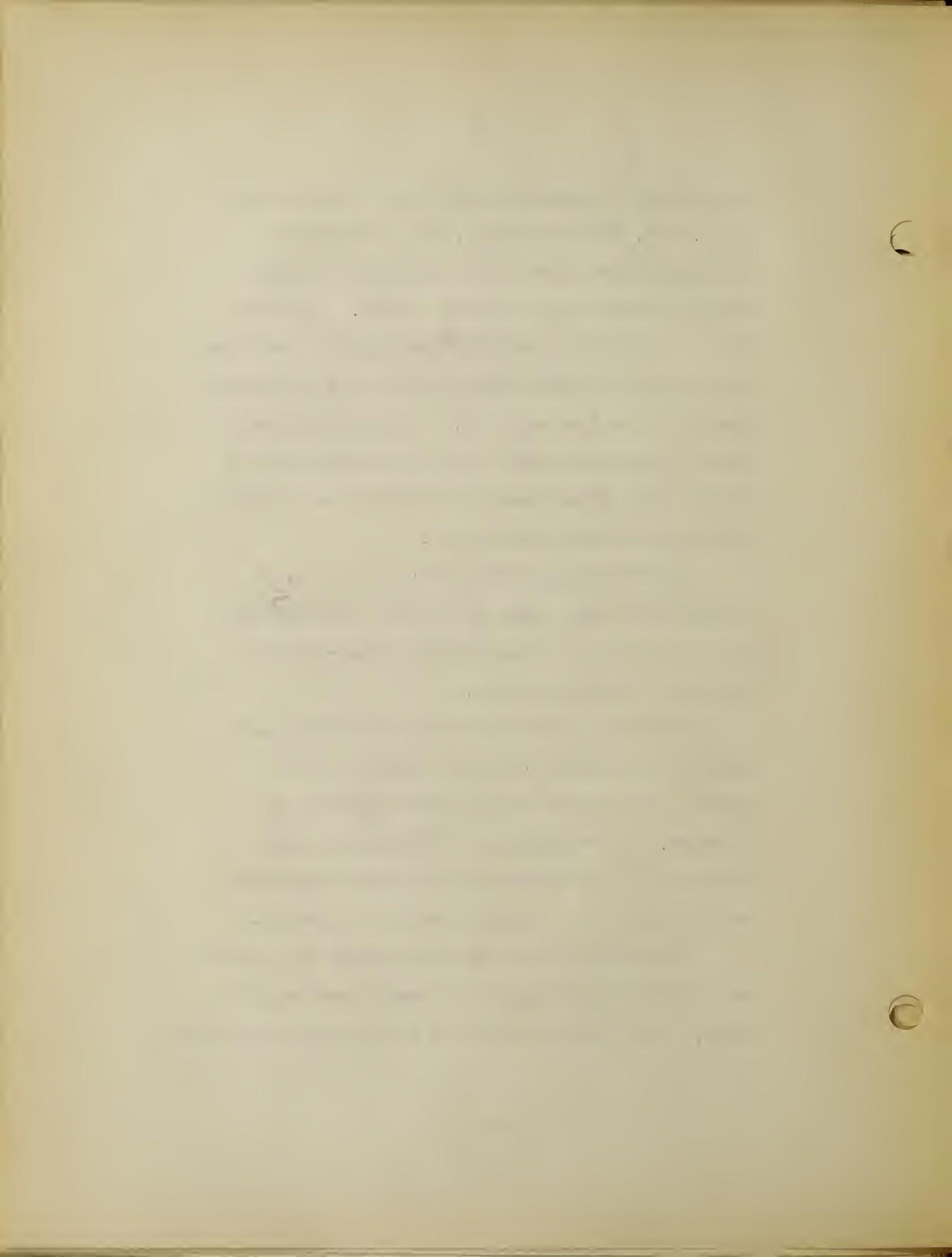


secured an introduction for her to Hugh Stuart Boyd. Mr. Boyd was blind, but a student of Hellenic literature and a recognized author. He became her friend and her tutor. She became a student of Grecian lore and the knowledge gained at this time served later as a background for her classical writing. Elizabeth Barrett never forgot her blind tutor and friend and in later years often sought his advice and opinion through their correspondence.

In 1828, Elizabeth's first real sorrow entered her life, when her mother, who had been ill for some time, died at the comparatively early age of forty-eight.

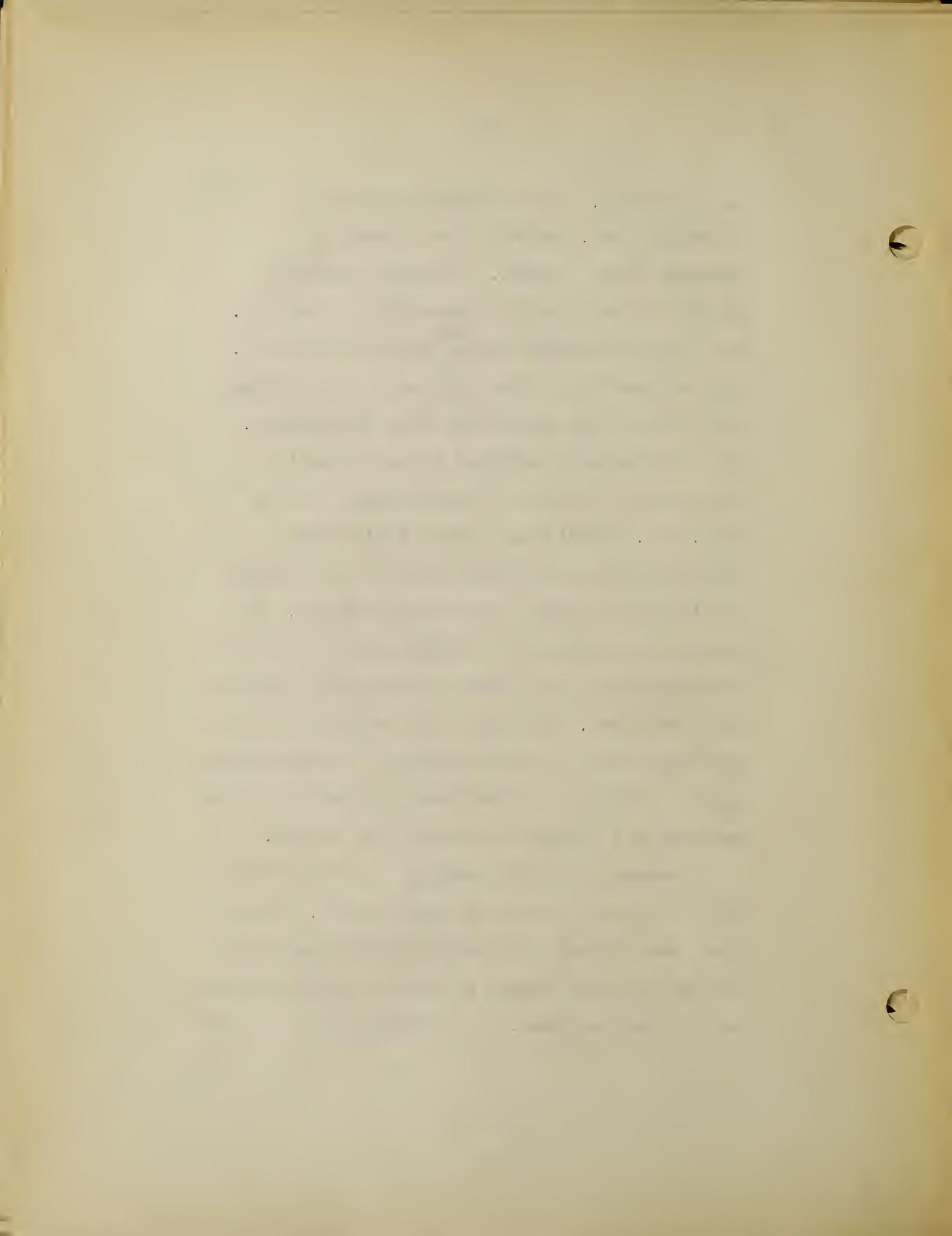
Elizabeth, altho an invalid herself, assumed the responsibility of consoler to her father and adviser to her seven brothers and sisters. Shortly after, Elizabeth was well enough to go to France to study but conditions at home made it necessary for her to return.

From Hope End the Barretts moved to Sidmouth and nothing is known of the family during this time, except the publication in 1833 of Elizabeth's



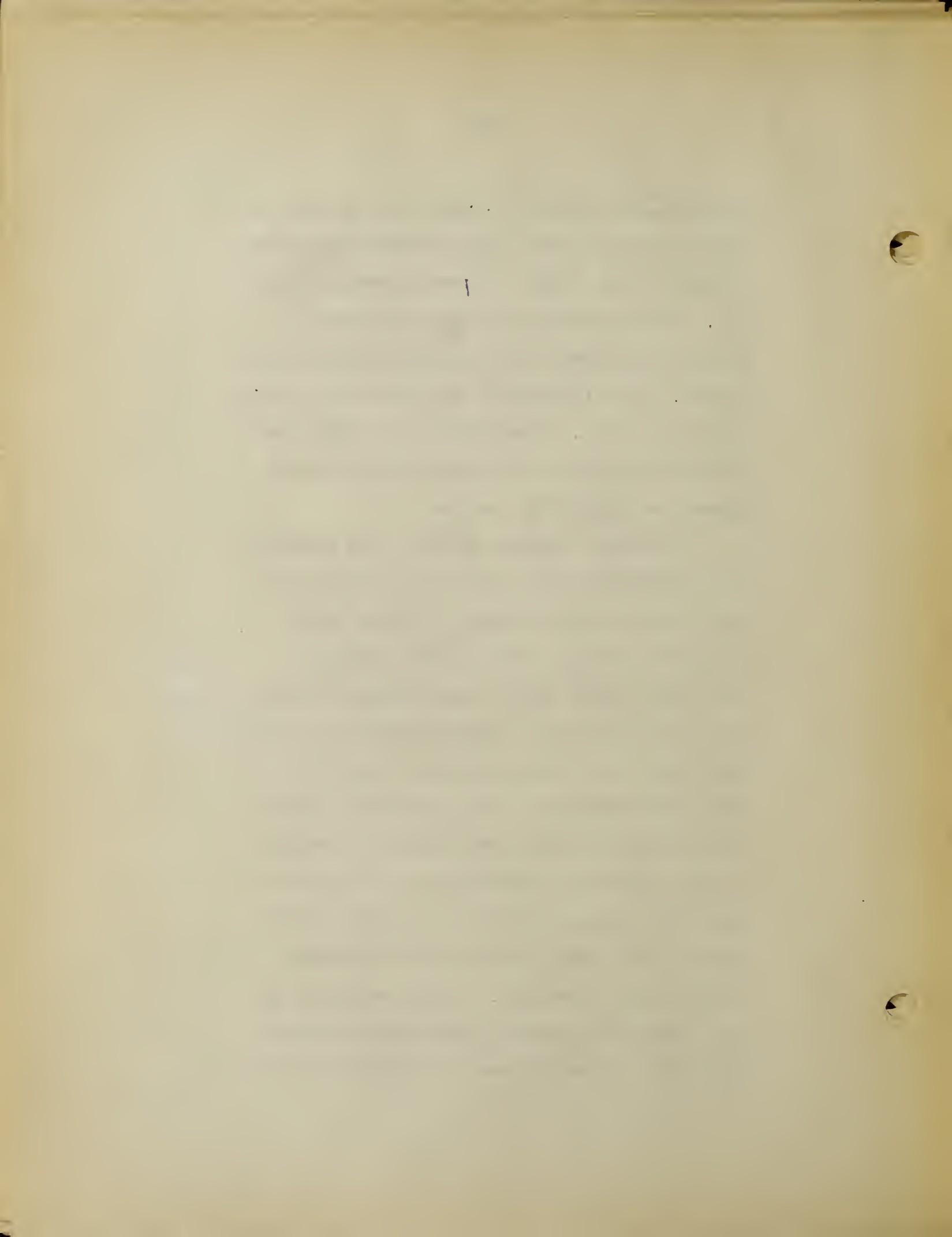
second volume. After these two years in Devonshire, Mr. Barrett took a house at Gloucester Place, London. Elizabeth suffered by this return from the sea-shore to the city. Her delicate health finally gave way entirely. She was confined to her room and to most young women conditions would have been intolerable. Her room was kept darkened by her father's order, and a feeling of death reigned in the home. Mr. Barrett was a very domineering father and later Elizabeth found it increasingly difficult to live with him peacefully. He ruined the chances for happiness for her sisters by refusing to allow them to marry very respectable young men. He would have ruined her's too, but fortunately she had inherited a considerable amount of his own independence and when the time came she was prepared to assert her rights.

Because of her ill health, she devoted herself to writing poetry for publication. At this time, she saw very few people outside her family circle, but John Kenyon a distant relative became her literary adviser. He introduced her to most



of her early literary friends, and he was the means of getting her poems accepted and works noticed by the chief literary journals of the day. The authoress, Mary Russell Mitford, became acquainted with Elizabeth through John Kenyon. This friendship influenced her future literary career. Miss Mitford has given us a detailed account of Miss Barrett's personal appearance describing her as

"A slight, girlish figure, very delicate, with exquisite hands and feet, a round face with a most noble forehead, a large mouth, beautifully formed and full of expression, lips like parted coral, teeth large, regular, and glittering with healthy whiteness, large, dark eyes, with such eyelashes, resting on the cheek when cast down, when turned upwards touching the flexible and expressive eyebrow, a dark complexion, literally as bright as a dark china rose, a profusion of silky, dark, curls, and a look of youth and of modesty hardly to be expressed. This, added to the very simple but graceful and costly dress by which all the family are distinguished, is an

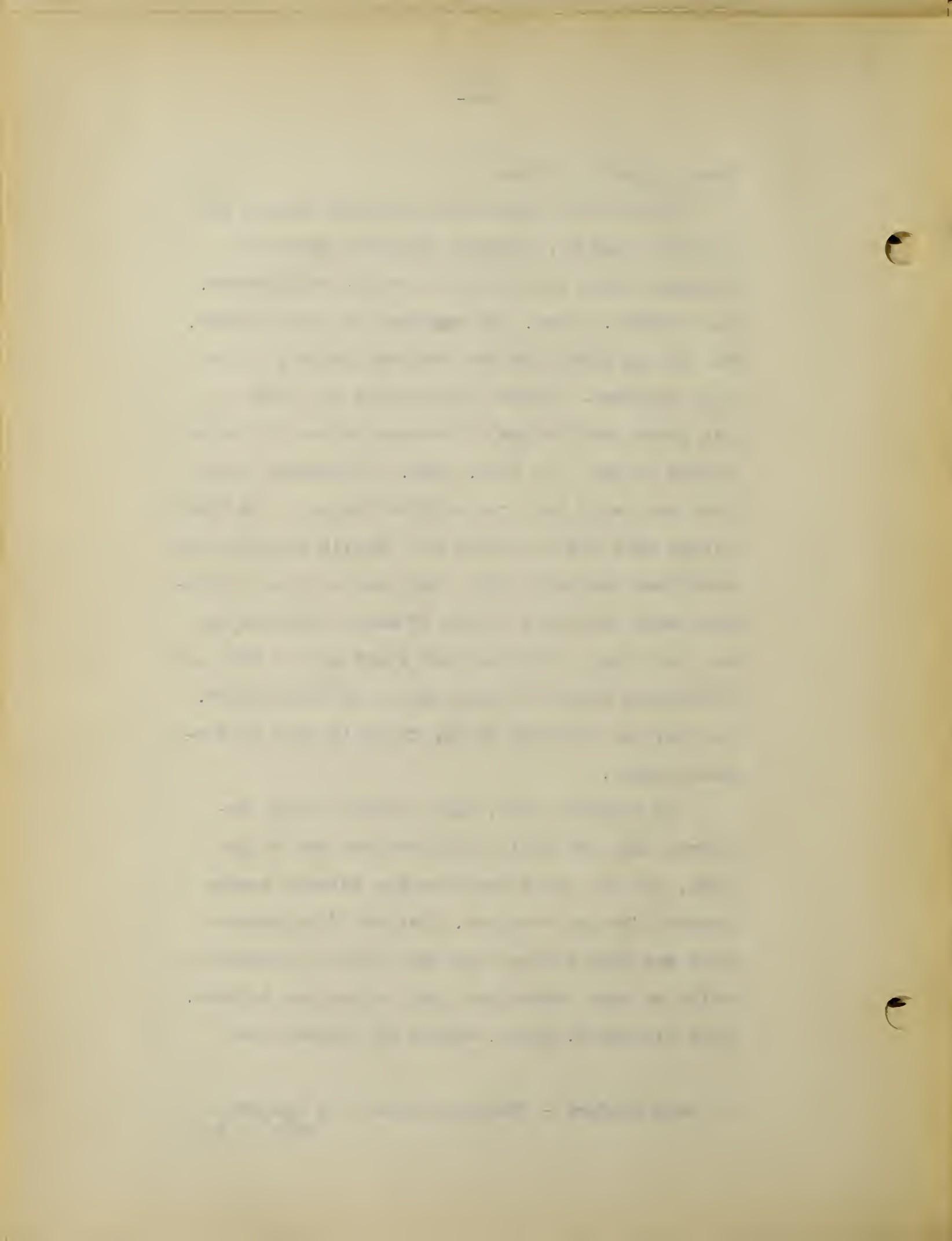


exact portrait of her." ¹

In 1838 Miss Barrett's condition became so critical that Dr. Chambers insisted upon her leaving London and going to Torquay with Edward, her brother. Here, she remained for three years, and during this time the greatest tragedy of her life occurred. Edward had devoted his time to his sister and he was a constant source of inspiration to her. In July, 1840, he arranged to go on a sail with two friends from Torquay. He didn't return that day or Sunday and finally reports were confirmed that all three were lost at sea. Elizabeth went through a period of mental torture, for she felt that if she had not urged him to stay in Torquay he would not have met an untimely death. In 1841 she returned to her father's home in Wimpole Street.

By February 1842, Miss Barrett was so improved that she could walk from her bed to the sofa, and for the first time her friends became hopeful for her recovery. Her chief correspondent was Miss Mitford and much of the information which we have comes from their exchanged letters. With Richard H. Horne, author of "Orion" and

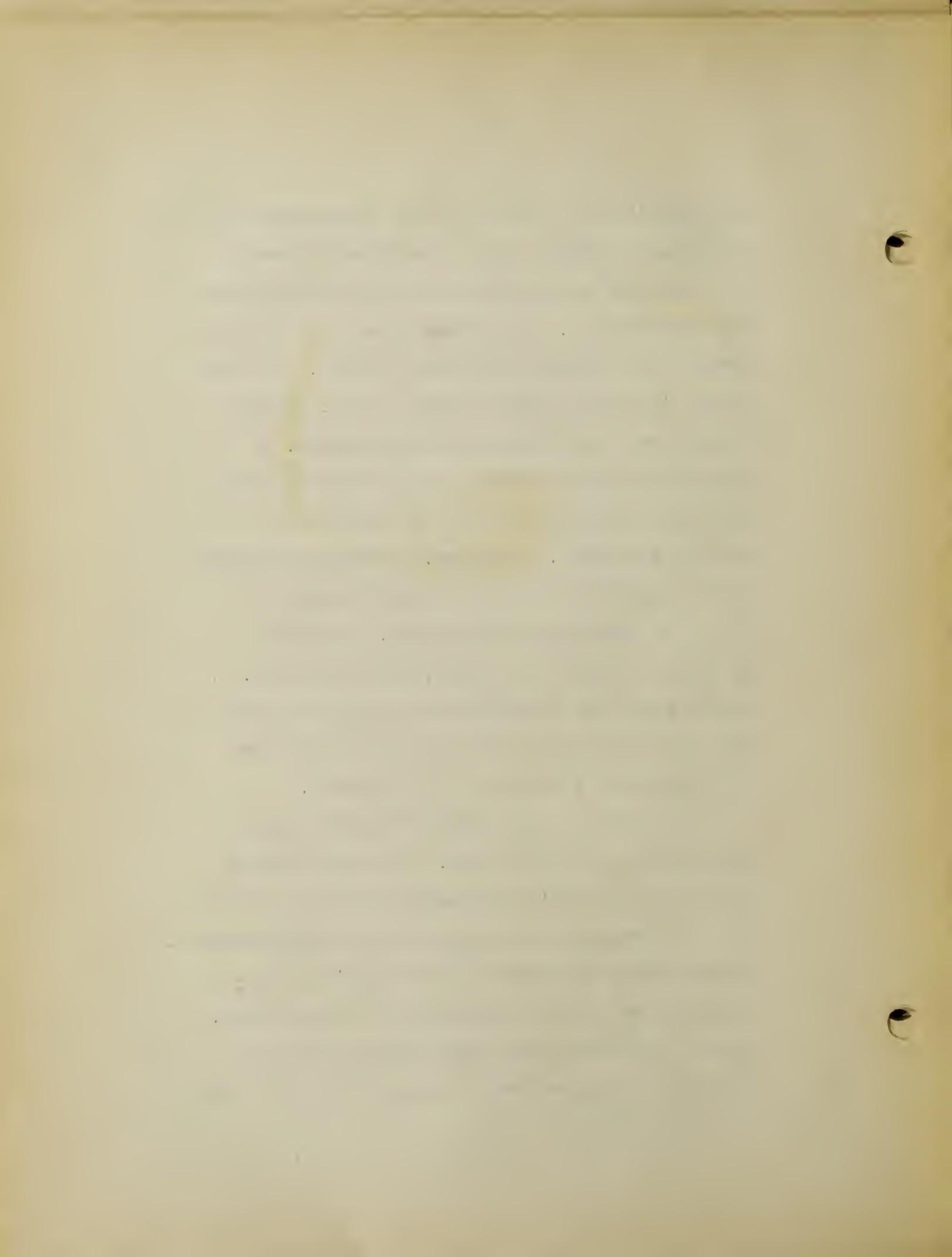
¹ Mary Mitford - "Recollections of a Literary Life" - p. 5



Cosmosde 'Medici, she carried on a correspondence which was a stimulation in her literary career.

The next four years past quickly and quietly for Miss Barrett. She wrote a great deal of material, but published relatively little. In 1846 Kenyon introduced Miss Barrett to Mrs. Jameson an authoress of several well-known works. An interesting correspondence was carried on which discussed the same subjects as that of Miss Mitford and Horne. When Mrs. Jameson's interests made it necessary for her to leave London for Italy and France, she offered Mr. Barrett to accompany Elizabeth to Italy, but he refused. Miss Barrett had dreamed for a long while of a visit to Italy, but little did she realize how very soon that dream would be a reality.

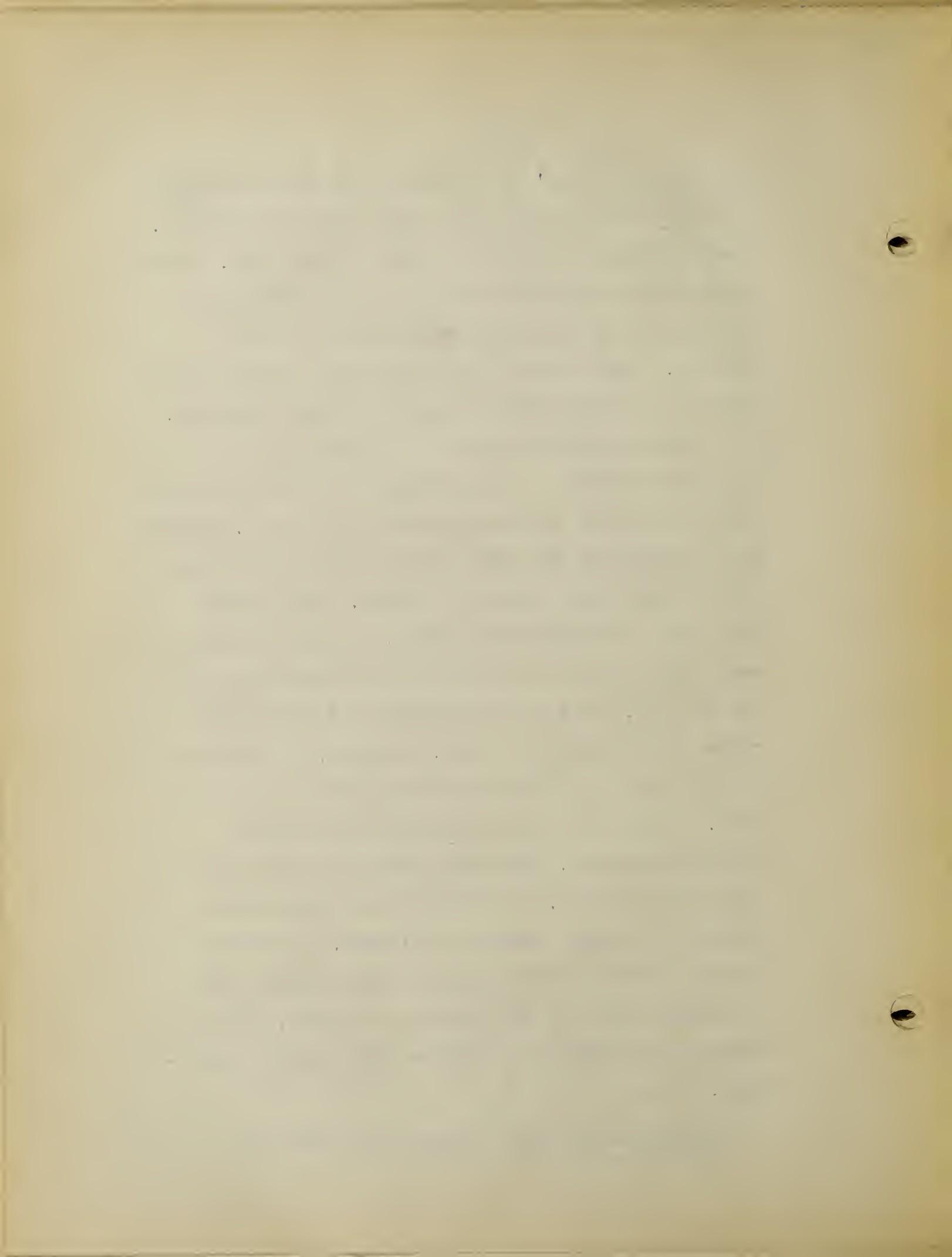
One of the living poets whom Miss Barrett admired was Robert Browning. She mentioned him in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" and after that his name was frequently mentioned in her correspondence. Kenyon was an old friend of Browning's father; so naturally he took an interest in the young poet. Between these two there began one of the most beautiful correspondences that the world has been



privileged to read!¹ They had many thoughts in common and they wrote to each other with amazing regularity. Each criticised severely the work of the other. Soon their letters took on a deeper and more sympathetic meaning than the exchange of criticisms usually arouses. They were not personally acquainted however until a relatively short time before their marriage.

Robert Browning asked to call and talk to Elizabeth Barrett, but she refused for sometime fearing that he would be disappointed when he met her. Although she very boldly expressed herself in her writing she was naturally very shy and retiring. She disliked the ordeal of meeting new people. She was startled when she realized the strength of feeling which she had for him, for love and marriage had taken small place in her scheme for life. Finally, she consented to his visit, and after the first she lived for his next. A love grew up which thrilled Robert and worried Elizabeth. She was older than he and more or less of an invalid. Her father's attitude was an obstacle to either overcome or ignore. They were forced to ignore it although Elizabeth prayed that she might reconcile her father to the idea, for she loved him and wanted to hold her place in his affections.

1 "The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning."



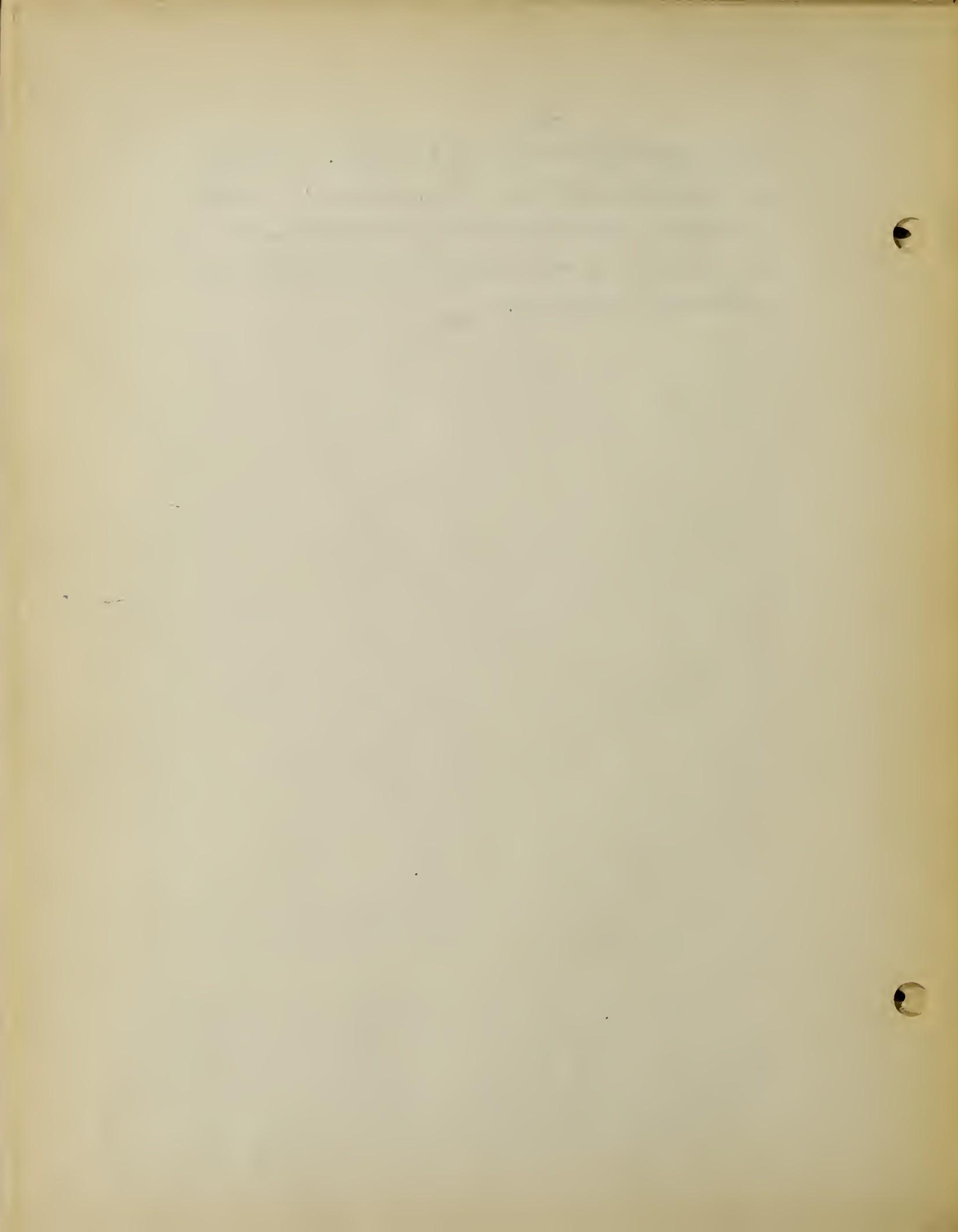
On the 12th of September 1846, Elizabeth Barrett married Robert Browning and one week later eloped to Italy by way of France. All their friends were surprised and many openly shocked. Mr. Kenyon, perhaps, was the only one who suspected the depth of their interest in each other, for he always questioned Elizabeth about Robert's visits. Mr. Barrett was openly antagonistic to their marriage and remained unreconciled at his death on the 17th of April 1857.

The Brownings spent a few months in Pisa and then moved to Florence. Casa Guida, an old palace, was the home where Mrs. Browning, except for short intervals, spent the rest of her life. The married life of the two great poets was ideal. They were rarely separated, for they traveled together always. Italians and Americans visited their home and have given us delightful pictures of their married happiness. To crown their happiness, a son, Robert Barrett Browning, was born on the 9th of March 1849. Casa Guida from this time on held the affection of Mrs. Browning. Her health was now better than it had ever been since her accident twenty-five years before.

The next twelve years were spent in travel and writing. They made frequent visits back to England in the summer and so kept in touch with their native land. They traveled extensively in Italy becoming

and the following year he was given a
small grant to continue his work.
After this period of time he was invited to
give a lecture at a theological seminary.

completely familiar with the situation. On a life as interesting and full as Mrs. Browning's a great deal more could be said by way of biography, but as this is to be only a brief sketch only the main points can be included.



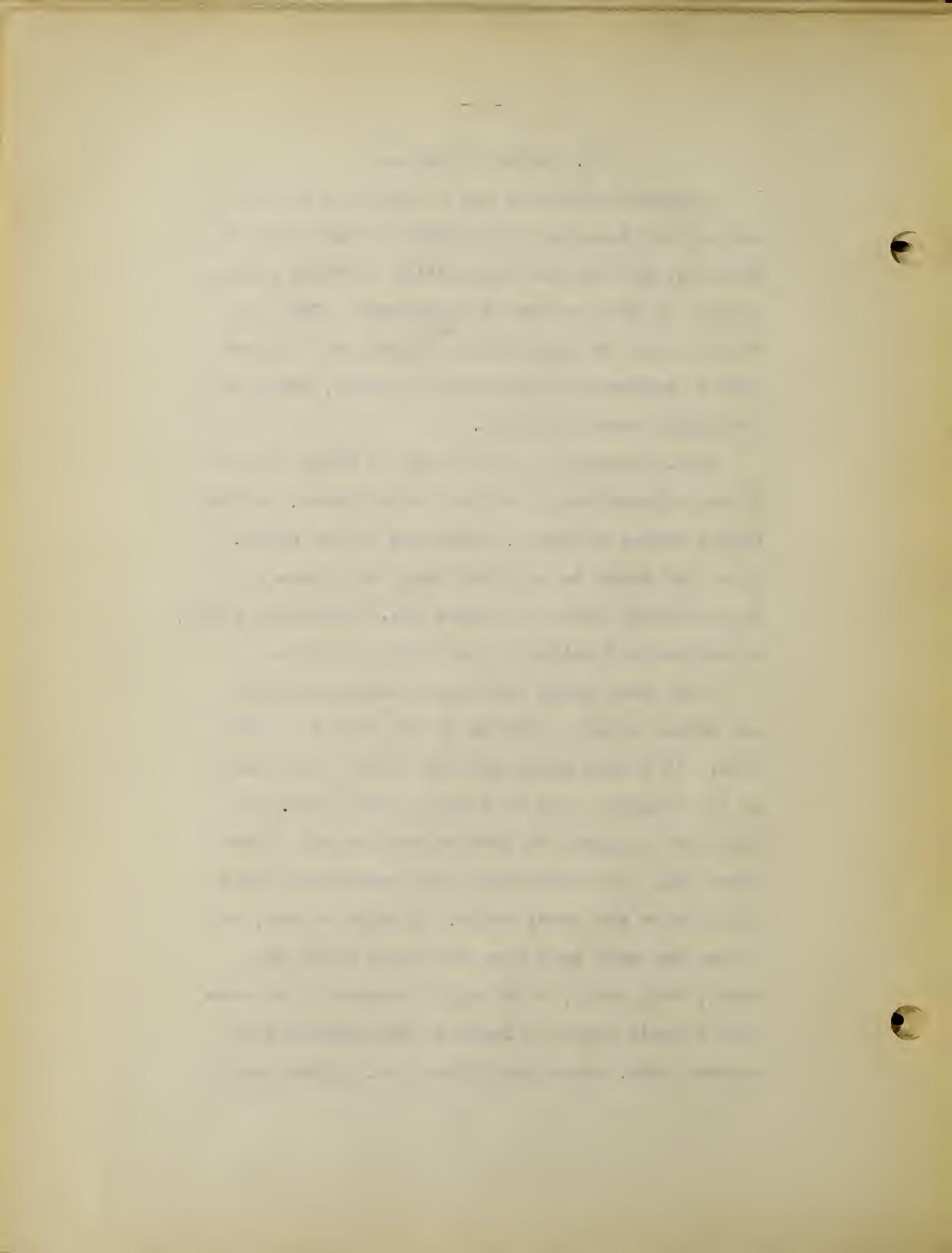
2. Versatile Writer.

Elizabeth Browning was a versatile writer.

Because her poems express ideas on many types of subjects, she has the distinction of being a deep thinker in many realms of experience. Not only was she able to think on many phases of life but also to express her thoughts in poetry, which is infinitely more difficult.

Mrs. Browning is criticised as being obscure in her expressions, careless in her rhyme, trivial in her choice of words, impetuous in her metre. This list might be enlarged upon, but there will be no attempt here to discuss Mrs. Browning's style, as her subject matter is the chief interest.

The first poems which Mrs. Browning wrote are rather closely related to the events in her life. At a very early age she became interested in the classics, and as a result "The Battle of Marathon" appeared in 1820 before she was eleven years old. It is the work of a precocious child about which she later wrote, "I wrote verses, as I dare say many have done who never wrote any poems, very early, -- at eight years old and earlier I could make you laugh by the narrative of nascent odes, epics, and didactics, crying aloud



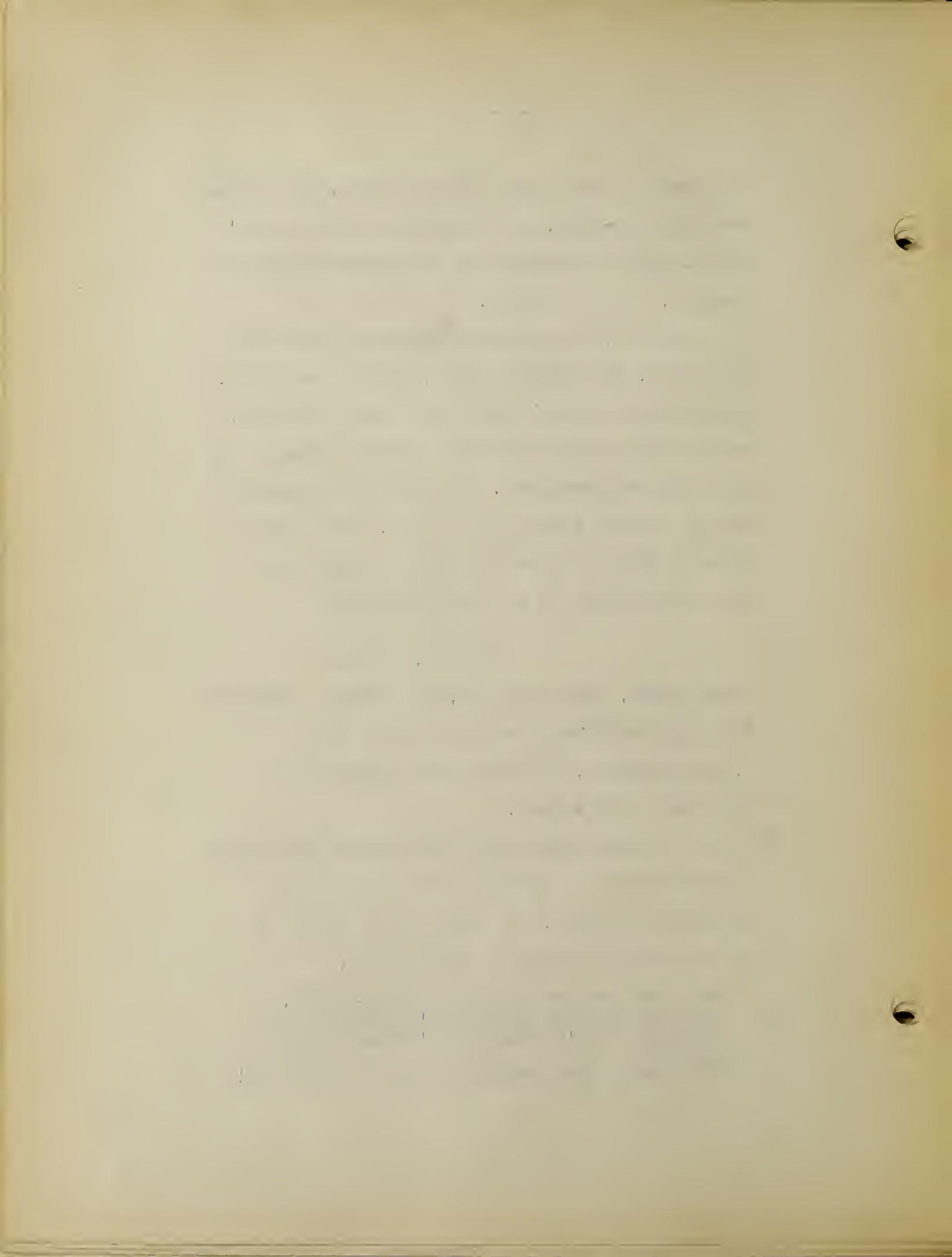
on obsolete muses from childish lips. The Greeks were my demi-gods, and haunted me out of Pope's Homer, until I dreamt more of Agamemnon than of Moses , the black pony."

In 1826, her earliest volume of poems was published, "An Essay on Mind, with other poems." "The Essay on Mind" shows the extent of study, reading and reflection which she had done by the time she was seventeen. This poem she repented having written later in her life, for it was didactic and may have been one of the false poems she refers to in "Aurora Leigh":-

"For me, I wrote
False poems, like the rest, and thought them true
Because myself was true in writing them
I, peradventure, have writ true ones since
With less complacence."

In this volume there appeared a short poem which is interesting in showing her relationship to her brother Edward. It was called "Verses to my Brother" and includes these lines,

"Together have we past our infant hours,
Together sported childhood's spring away,
Together cull'd young Hope's fast budding
flowers
To wreath the forehead of each coming day!



"And when the laughing mood was nearly o'er
Together many a minute did er wile
On Horace' page, or Maro's sweeter lore;
While one young cutie, on the classic style
Would sagely try to frown, and make the
other smile.

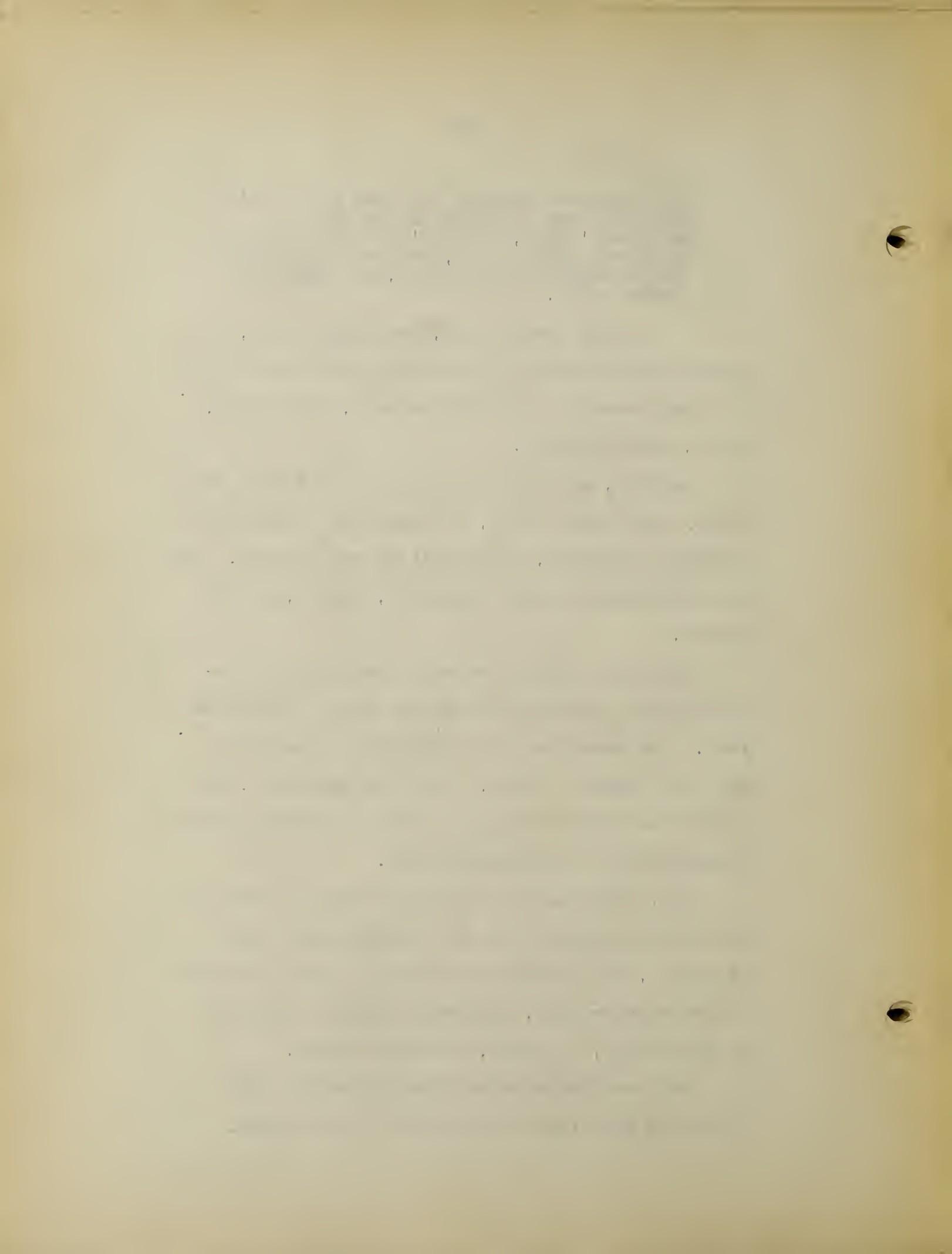
To Hugh Stuart Boyd, her blind tutor, she showed her devotion and appreciation in later life in three sonnets on "His Blindness", "His Death, 1848", and "Legacies".

In 1833, her second volume appeared with about twenty very short poems, the majority of which expressed a youthful, philosophical speculation. She was interested in life and death, in God, and in people.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was from the beginning and remained through her life a Christian poet. Two examples of her interest in religion are "The Drama of Exile," and "The Serephim". She dealt with religious subjects with a mystical understanding and a reverent attitude.

Mrs. Browning was a keen observer of life in the everyday aspects and an understanding lover of nature, for we find in her poems many references to the out-of-doors, such as; "Earth", "Autumn", "A Dead Rose", "A Reed", and many others.

Her association with Robert Browning gave to her an experience in a realm of life which,



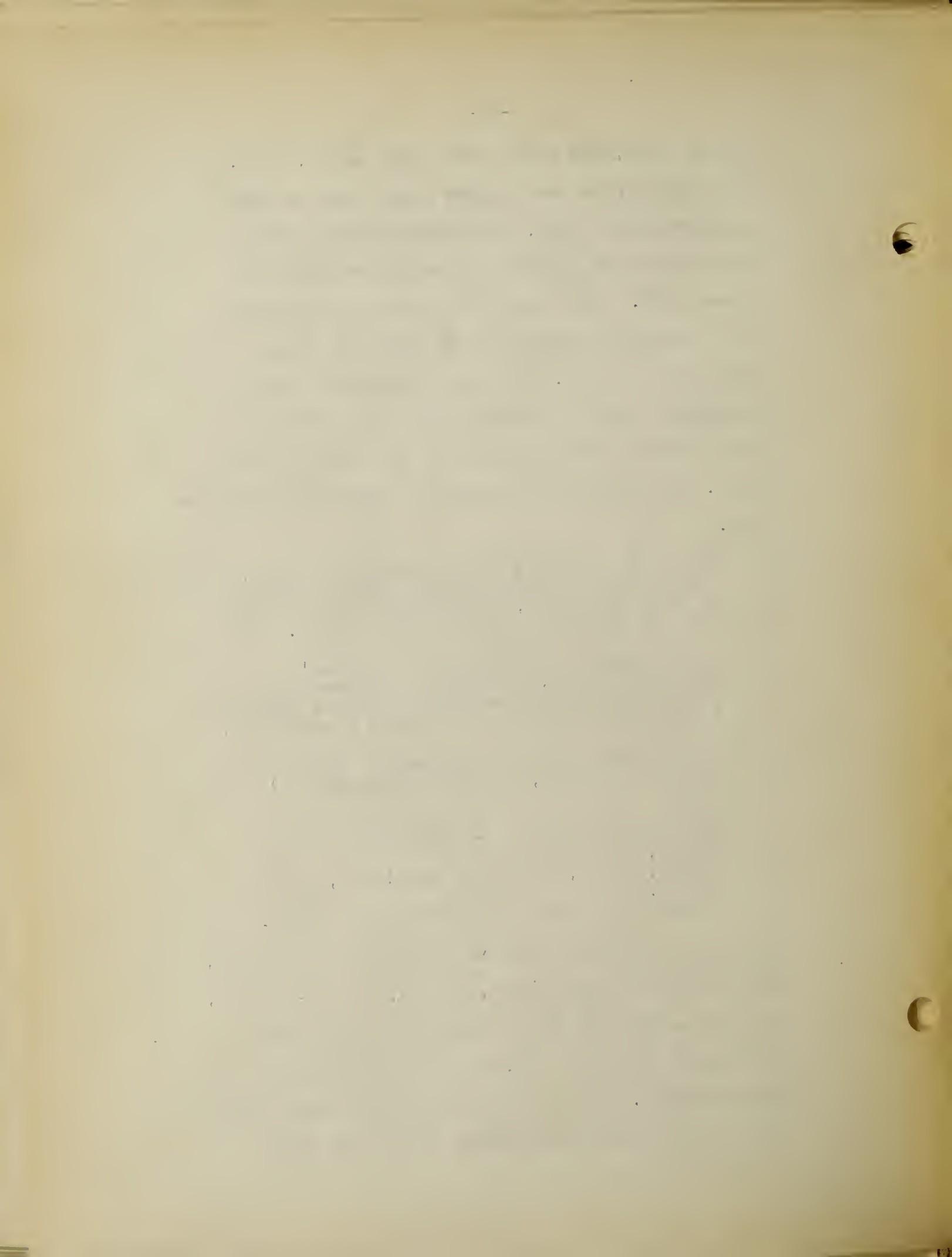
without him, she might never have known, love. This great love came at the right time to give balance to her life, for without it she would have lacked the womanliness which was hers in later life. The "Sonnets from the Portuguese" is a beautiful expression of what this ideal love meant to her. This association seemed to compensate for the unusual life which she had been forced to live because of her physical handicap. The forty-third sonnet is especially beautiful.

"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling our of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light
I love thee freely as men strive for right;
I love thee purely as they turn from Praise.

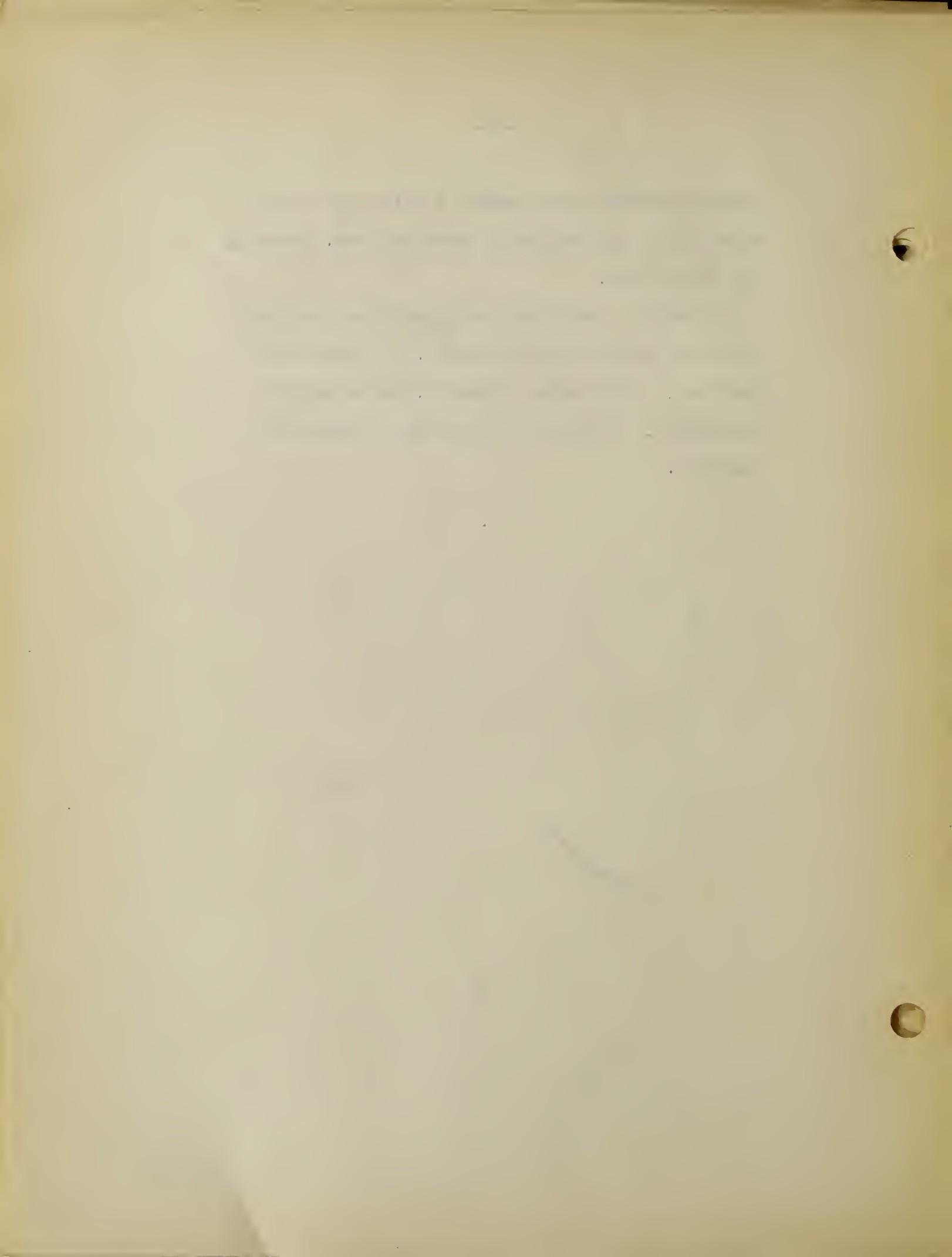
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's
faith
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, -I love thee with the
breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! and, if God
choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

To these types of ideas expressed on the classics, philosophical speculation, nature, life and death, religion, and love may be added the type which this paper is concerned, the social conditions of the times. Here we will merely list the poems which come under this heading and in the next



section discuss the poems in relation to the specific situation which prompted Mrs. Browning to write them.

Social conditions influenced the writing of; "The Cry of the Children", "A Curse for a Nation", "Casa Guida Windows", "Poems before Congress", "A Song for the Ragged Schools of London".

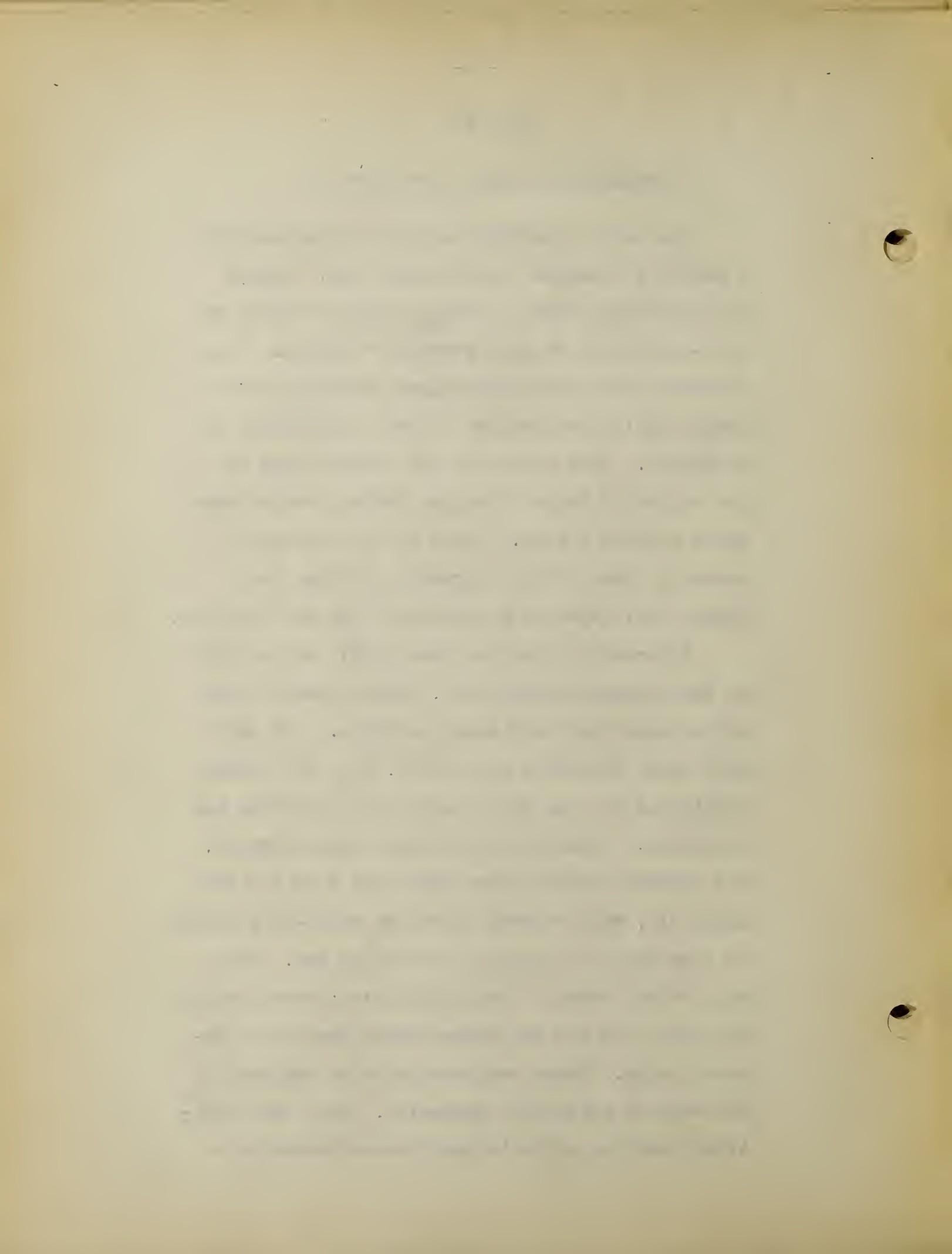


Part III

Correlation of Part I and Part II

The early nineteenth century in England was a period of changed social conditions. People were concerned with the great losses of money by over-production without sufficient markets. They regretted the fact that skilled trades-men were losing their jobs because of the introduction of machinery. They knew that the farmers were in the depths of despair because their products were being sold at a loss. But a far greater evil seemed to make little impression or else they closed their eyes to a situation that was familiar.

In order to clear as much profit as possible in their manufactured goods, factory owners were hiring women and very young children. Not only were there extremely long hours, but also filthy conditions for the child laborer in the mines and factories. These small children, babies really, for reports say that some were only four and five years old, were working under the sweat-shop system of long hours and next to nothing in pay. They were being robbed of their play time; consequently they were old men and women before they could become youths. There was absolutely no opportunity for even an elementary education. They knew relatively nothing of God's great out-of-doors on a



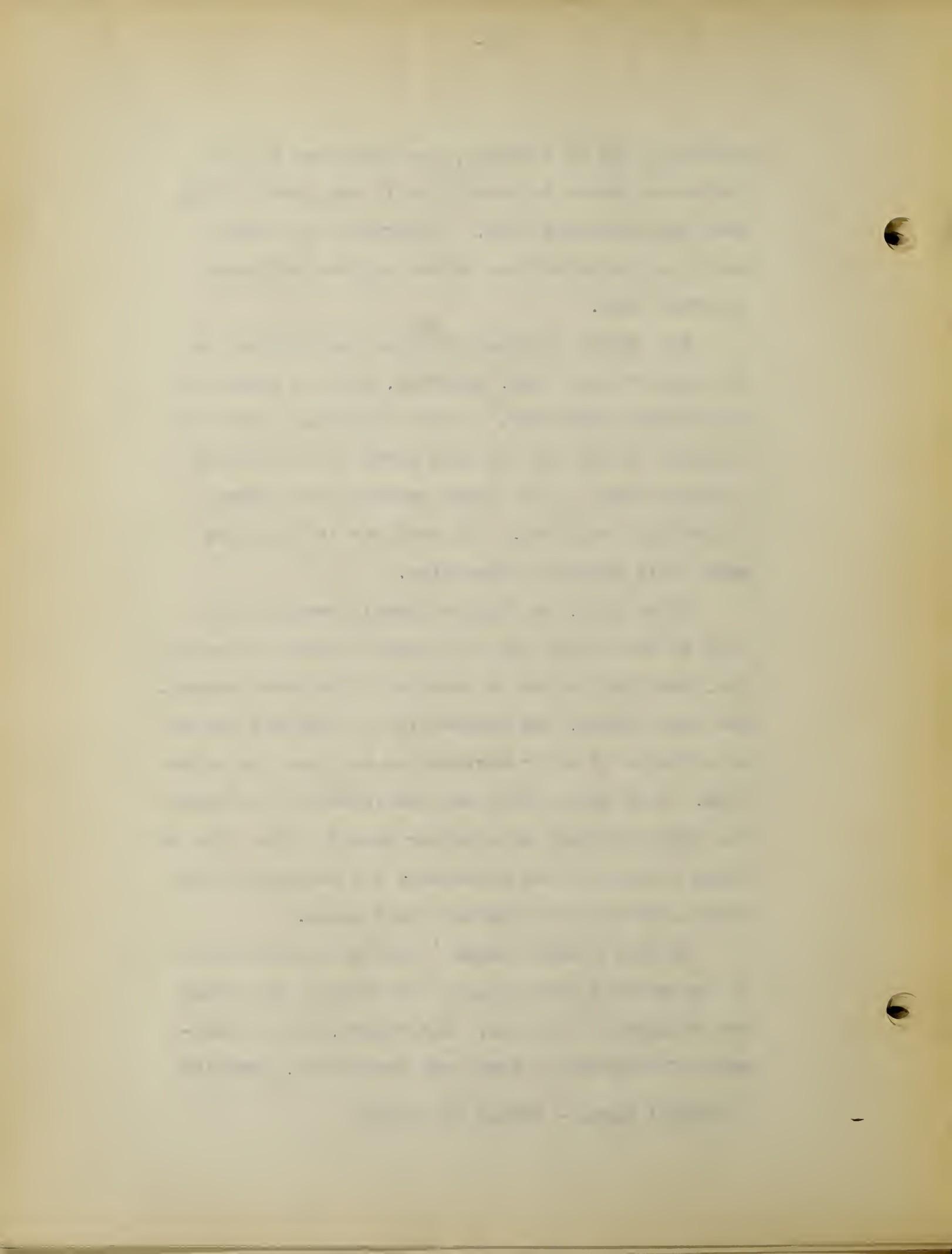
beautiful day of sunshine, for they were at the factories before day-break and it was usually dusk when they returned home. Children in the mines went down below surface before sunrise and came up after dark.

The health of these children was impaired by the lack of good food, overwork, lack of fresh air and filthy conditions. In the factories, lint was breathed in through the long hours of the day and finally lodged in the lungs bringing on a fatal tubercular condition. The coal gas in the mines made child mortality appalling.

About 1830, the English people decided not only to talk about the evil social conditions existing, but also to act in order to bring about reform. Two years later, the Reform Bill of 1832 was passed as evidence of their decision to act upon the situation. This Reform Bill was the incentive for numerous investigations of existing social evils. One of these investigations influenced the writing of one of Mrs. Browning's greatest short poems.

In 1838 Richard Horne¹ made an investigation of the working conditions of children in the mines and factories of London. His report, "The Employment of Children in Mines and Factories", revealed

¹ Richard Horne - Author of "Orion"

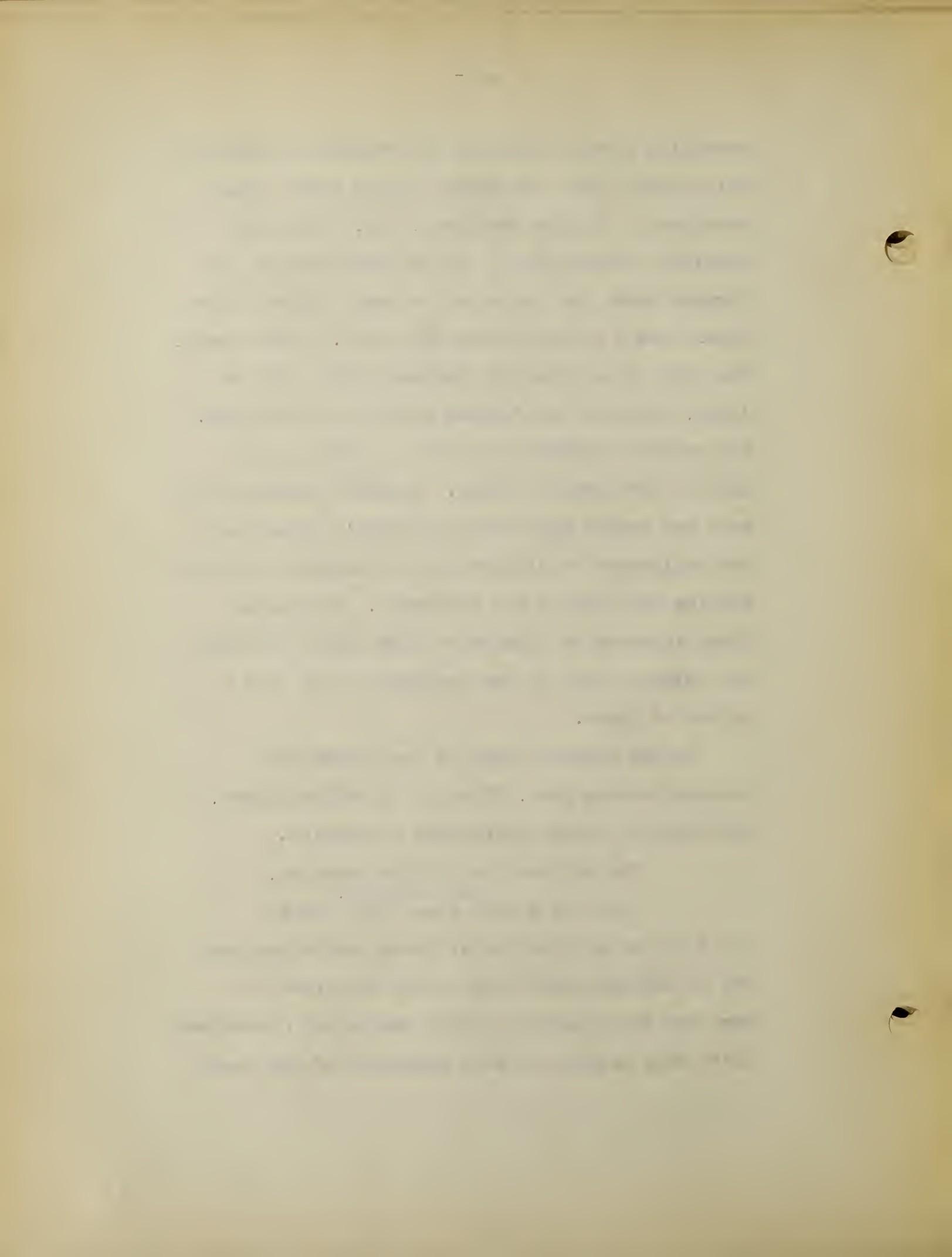


startling facts concerning the wretched conditions which caused the high death rate of these young employees. In this same year, Mrs. Browning's physician ordered her to leave London and go to Torquay where she would have a small chance to recover from a critical lung condition. Fortunately, the mild climate had the desired effect and she lived, although her friends had held little hope. She was not allowed to return to London until late in the summer of 1841. Sometime between this date and August 1843 she read Horne's report on the employment of children and it excited her into writing "The Cry of the Children". This poem first appeared in "Blackwood" for August 1843 and the following year it was included in the 1844 volume of poems.

In the opening lines of Mrs. Browning's thirteen stanza poem, "The Cry of the Children", she asks her fellow-countrymen a question.

"Do ye hear the children weeping,
O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years?"

Could her people know about these conditions and yet do nothing about them or did they need to have the facts drawn to their attention? Doubtless there were people who were conscious of the fact

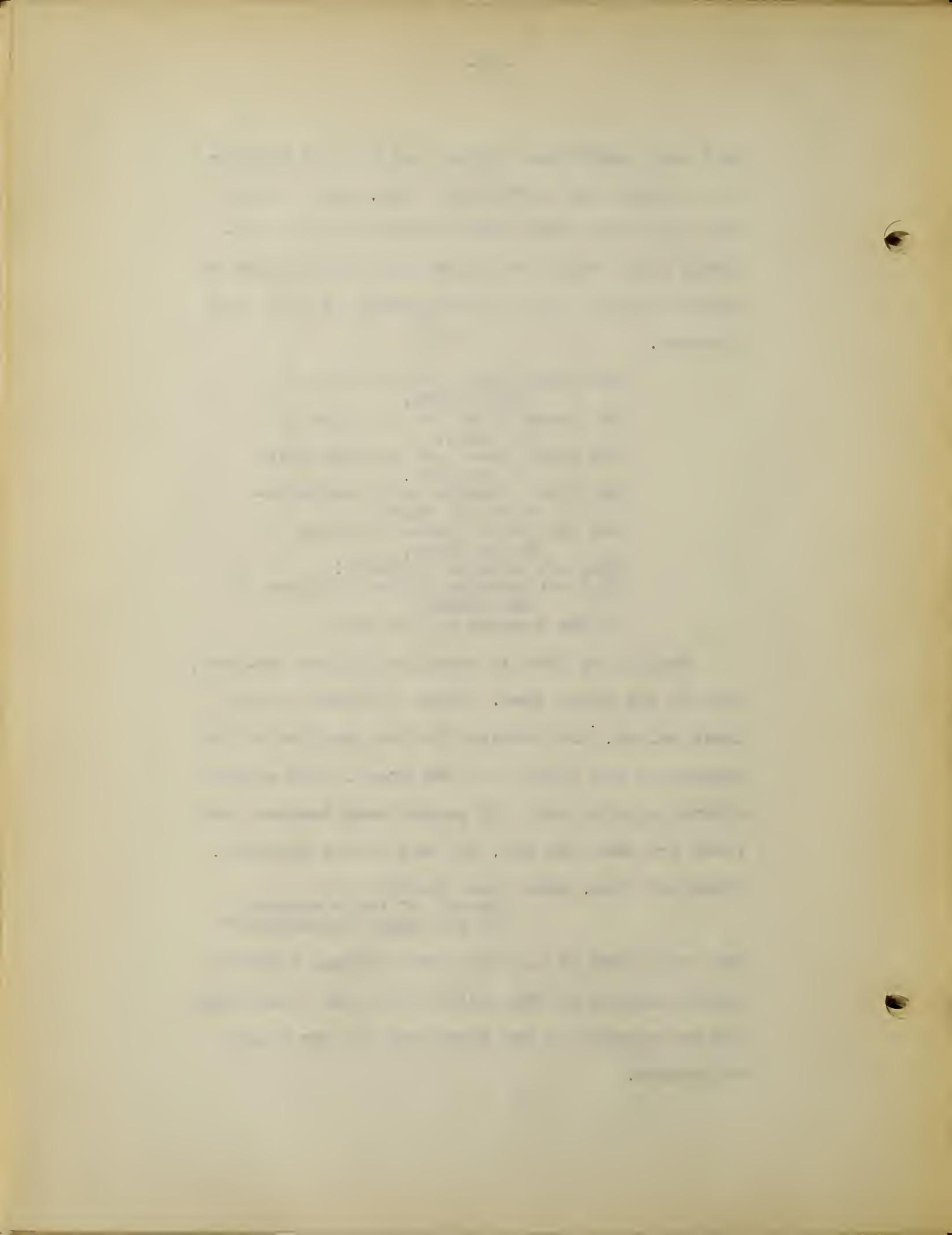


that such conditions existed and yet did nothing to eliminate the suffering. True, also, is the fact that there were those who needed to be informed about these conditions and then aroused to action by just such a vivid picture as this poem portrays.

"The young lambs are bleating in
the meadows,
The young birds are chirping in
the nest,
The young fawns are playing with
the shadows,
The young flowers are blowing to-
ward the west--
But the young, young children, O
my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly!
They are weeping in the playtime of
the others
In the country of the free."

Everything that is young is playing outdoors, growing and being free. These children, little human beings, are weeping "in the playtime of the others--in the country of the free". The second stanza explains that old people weep because their lives are near the end, but why should children, young and free, weep "sore before the bosoms of their mothers
In our happy Fatherland?"

The last lines of the first two stanzas directly rebuke England as responsible for such conditions "in the country of the free" and "in our happy Fatherland."



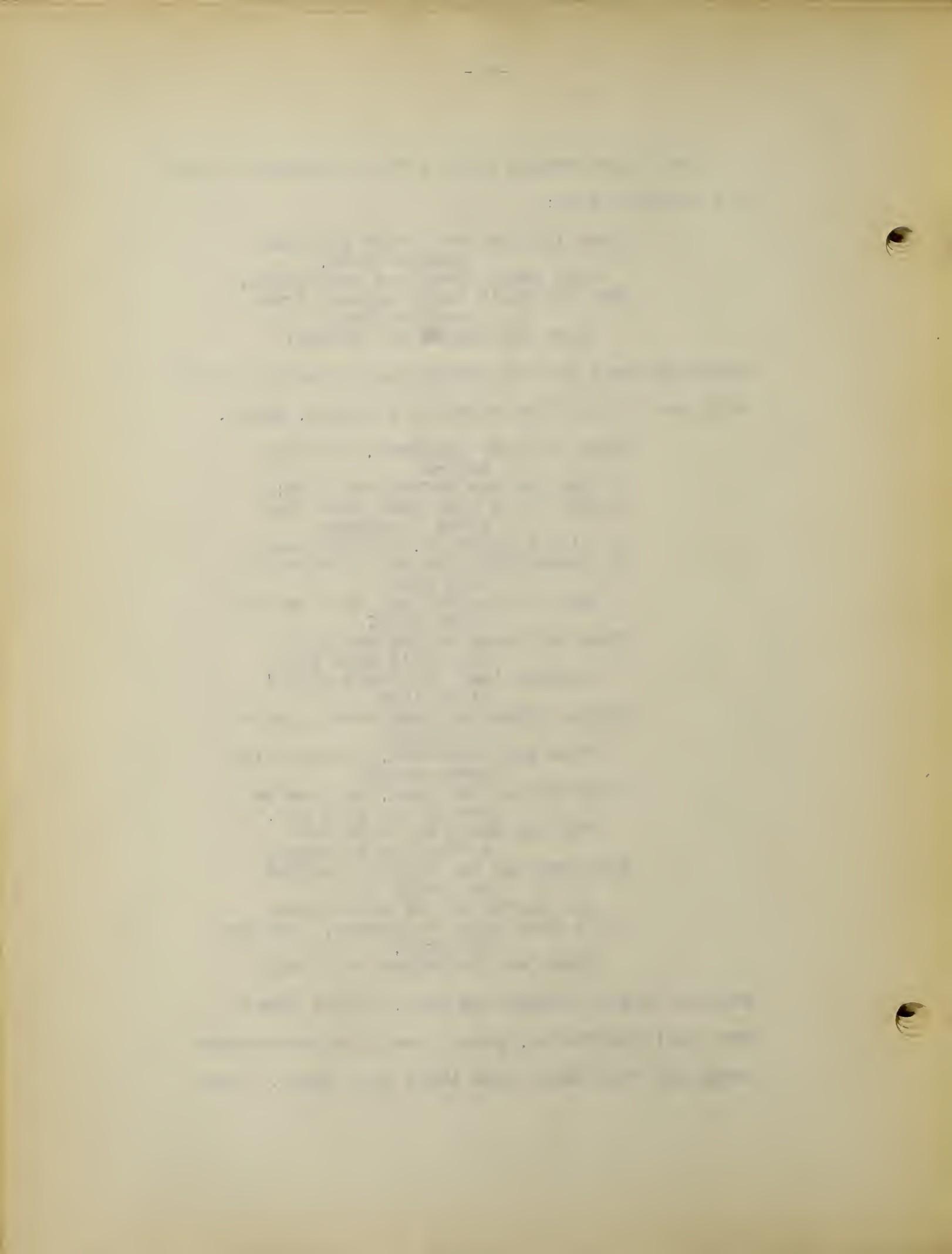
The third stanza gives a vivid picture of how the children look:

"They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
And their looks are sad to see,
For the man's hoary anguish draws
and presses
Down the cheeks of infancy."

These children are old before their time and faced with one of the older person's problems, death.

"True" say the children, "it may happen
That we die before our time:
Little Alice died last year, her grave is shapen
Like a snowball, in the rime.
We looked into the pit prepared to take her:
Was no room for any work in the close clay!
From the sleep within she lieth none will wake her,
Crying, 'get up little Alice!
it is day?
If you listen by that grave, in sun and shower
With your ear down, little Alice never cries;
Could we see her face, be sure we should not know her,
For the smile has time for growing in her eyes:
And merry go her moments, lulled and still in
The shroud by the kirk-chime.
It is good when it happens," say the children,
"That we die before out time."

Death to these children is kind, for it takes away their suffering, gives them an uninterrupted sleep and rest which make their eyes smile. They

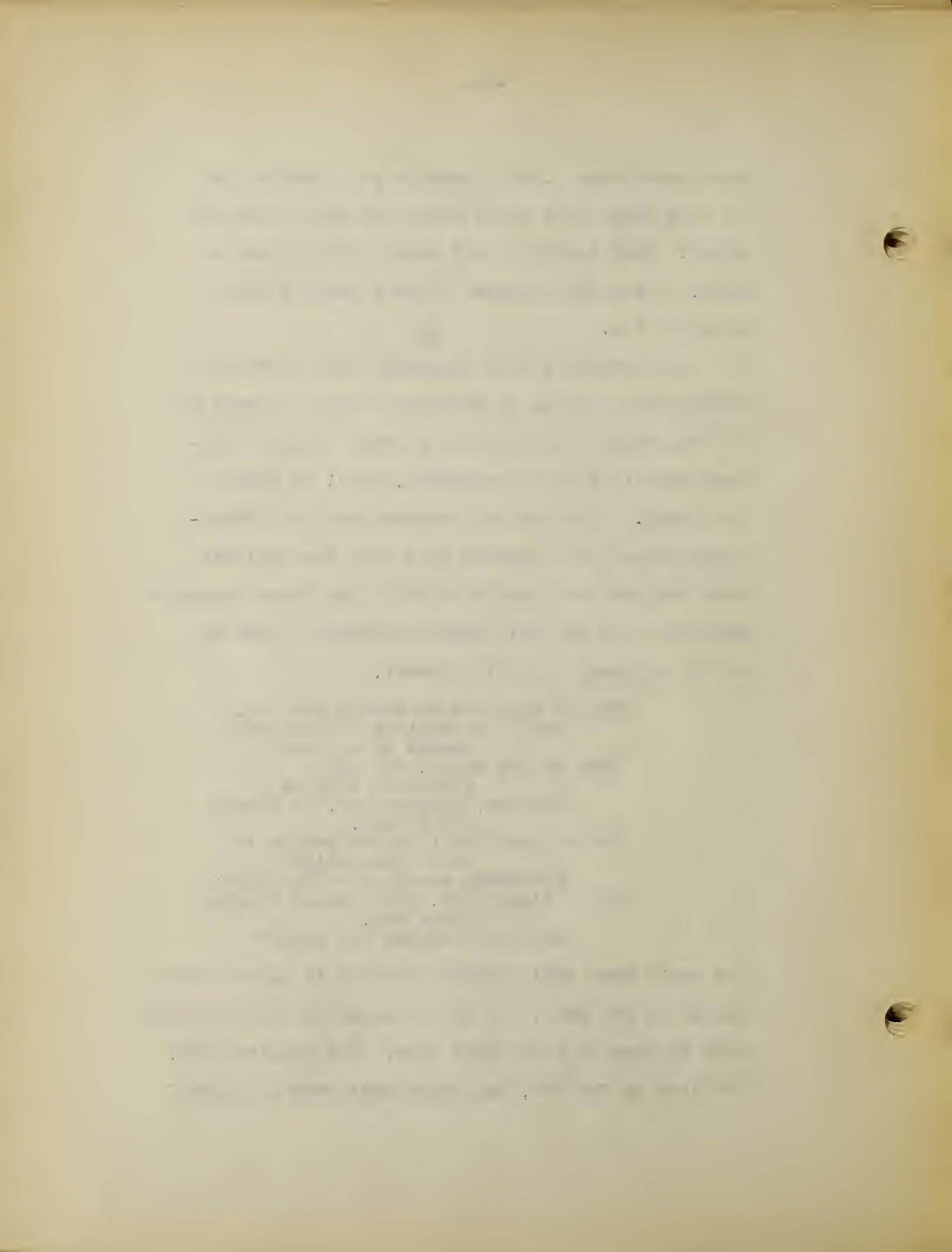


have never seen flowers growing in a meadow, but if they could they would drop down among them and sleep. They couldn't play because their legs are weak, or see the gorgeous flowers because their eyes are dim.

The seventh stanza describes the monotonous, everlasting turning of machinery until it seems as if "the walls turn in their places" and the children want to moan "O ye wheels, stop! be silent for today!" The last six stanzas are Mrs. Browning's prayer that someone will tell the children that God has made something more than these terrible machines. If you tell these children to look up to Him and pray they will answer,

"Who is God that He should hear us,
While the rushing of the iron
wheels is stirred?
When we sob aloud, the human
creatures near us
Pass by, hearing not, or answer
not a word.
And we hear not (for the wheels in
their resounding)
Strangers speaking at the door:
Is it likely God, with angels singing
round Him,
Hear our weeping any more?"

God can't hear their prayers because it is too noisy and He is far away. It is too noisy for people right near to them to hear their sobs. The children say, "We look up for God, but tears have made us blind."



No wonder the children do not believe what they are told, for

"God's possible is taught by His
world's loving,
And the children doubt of each."

The last part of the last stanza turns the problems over to the nation for its solution.

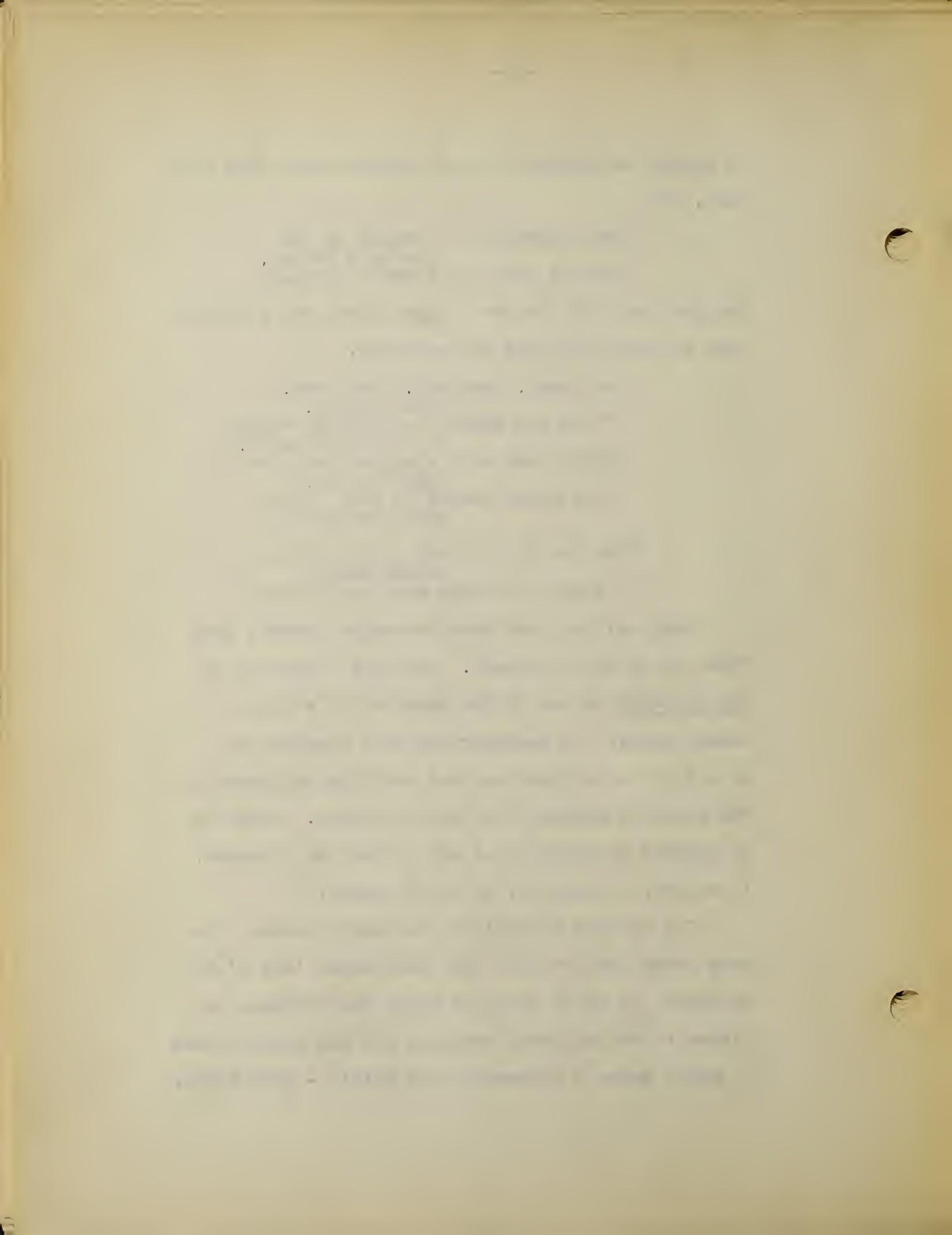
"How long", they say, "how long, O
cruel nation,
Will you stand, to move the world,
on a child's heart,--
Stifle down with a nailed heel its
palpitations,
And tread onward to your throne
amid the mart?"

"But the child's sob in the silence
curses deeper
Than the strong man in his wrath"

Many critics have made favorable comment upon "The Cry of the Children". One said, "The Cry of the Children is one of the greatest of strictly modern poems. It demonstrates that a pathos may be got out of cotton fuzz and rattling machinery.... The piece is radiant with poetic fervor. There is no respect in which it is not a study in language, in melody, in imagery, in truthfulness."¹

"It is hard to believe that such slender fingers could have written that passionate 'cry of the children' in which the poet calls her brothers to listen to the children 'weeping ere the sorrow comes

1. Peter Bayne - Biographer and Critic - 19th Century



with years', weeping from factories and mills for the bright youth that has never dawned on them." ¹

"The Cry of the Children, uneven as it is, takes its place beside Hood's, Song of the Shirt, for sweet pity and frowning indignation. In behalf of the little factory slaves, her soul took fire and she did what she could. If the British Mill owners were little likely to be impressed, it certainly affected the minds of public writers and speakers, who could fashion their more practical agitations after the pattern thus given them in the Mount." ²

This poem was written as a result of a strong emotion which had to be expressed. Mrs. Browning was not striving merely to gain a literary reputation but rather to eliminate suffering. She showed a keen interest in humanity, and felt, strongly, that England was overlooking a responsibility to her people.

Mrs. Browning's physical condition made it impossible for her to personally investigate the children's working conditions. Her family and friends were all moderately wealthy, so the problem was not closely associated to her living conditions. Her interest in this social evil was aroused because

1. Hamilton - "Women Writers", Vol. 2, p. 153

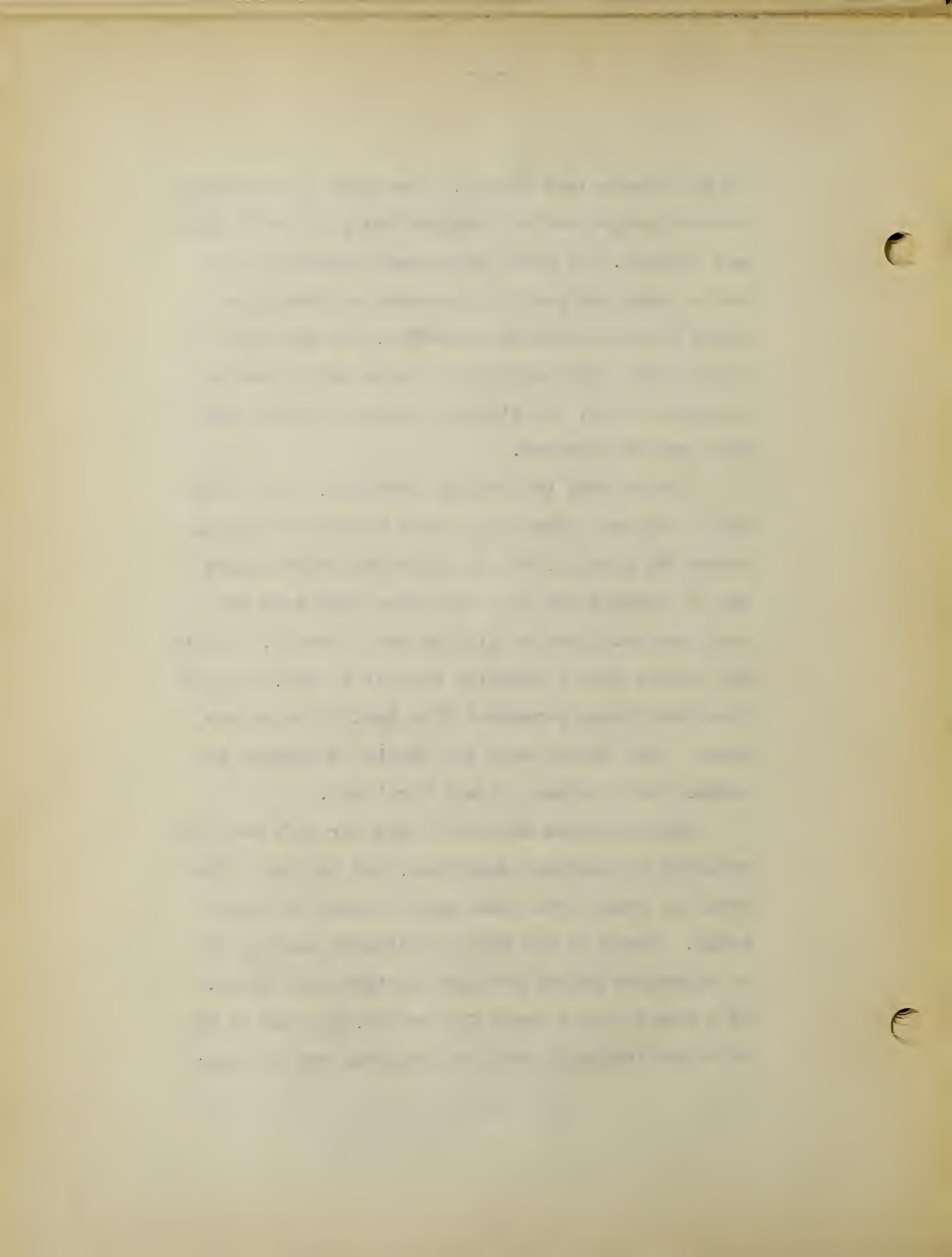
2. Modern Classics - "Elizabeth Barrett Browning"
P. 45

the first time in the history of the world
that the people of the United States
have been compelled to pay a tax
on their property to support a
war which they did not want,
and which they did not ask for.
The people of the United States
have been compelled to pay a tax
on their property to support a
war which they did not want,
and which they did not ask for.
The people of the United States
have been compelled to pay a tax
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The people of the United States
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of her innate love of man. She found it difficult to meet people, but she sympathized with their joys and sorrows. It would have been impossible for her to make any public appearance on behalf of these little suffering creatures, but her vivid poem reached more sensitive hearts than a speech possibly could. It stirred others to action and that was her purpose.

"Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers," She was older than these children when she became an invalid, but no doubt that fact helped her to imagine how they felt when they were denied the privilege of playing out of doors. Death had always been a familiar subject to her, for her room was always permeated by a death-like atmosphere. Her father made the family constantly remember that she was ill and might die.

Circumstances were such that her life was not affected by working conditions, but she was interested in other lives that were crushed by social evils. Women of the early nineteenth century had no organized reform movement as they have today. If a woman took a stand for reform, she had to do so alone with only unvoiced sympathy for backing;



so it took courage to make so open an appeal and rebuke.

Mrs. Browning wrote this poem with the hope that some of those who read it would be stirred into taking an active part in a campaign to abolish the evil. On this point Ingram says, "This Poem created quite a sensation in its appearance and has been deemed, with much show of probability, to have hastened and helped the passing of the initial Act of Parliament restricting the employment of children of tender years".¹ In 1845, Parliament passed an act which restricted the employment of children under ten years of age. A succession of acts followed raising the age limit to fourteen years of age for all dangerous machine jobs.

In 1846, Elizabeth Barrett married Robert Browning and went to Italy to make her home. She became very much interested in her beloved adopted country, but even then she remained interested in the poor children of England and particularly London. In Italy, in 1859 she wrote, "A Song for The Ragged Schools of London". Not only was she interested in the health of these children but also

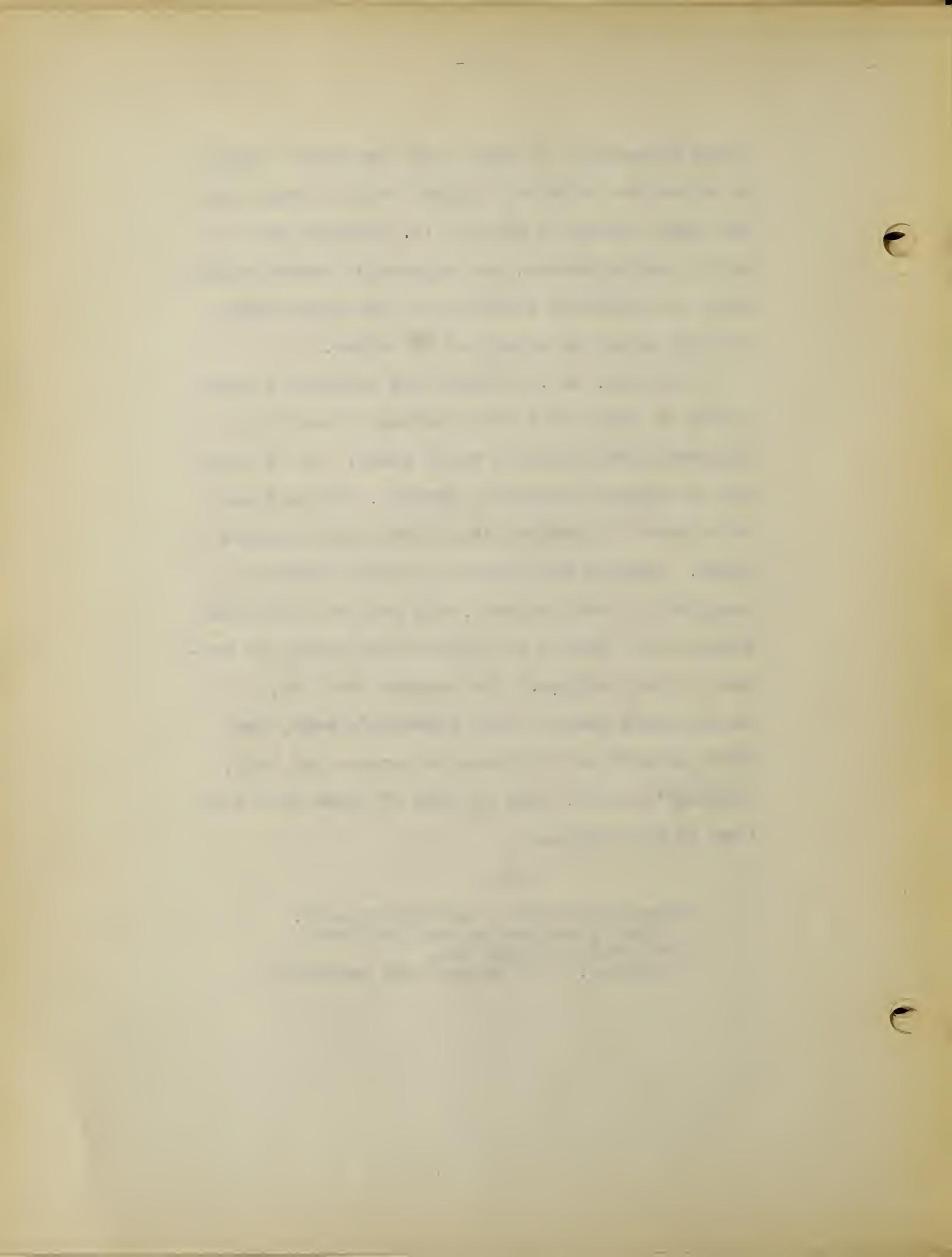
1. Ingrams -"Elizabeth Barrett Browning" - p. 88

their education. In the early nineteenth century an education could be acquired only by those who had money enough to pay for it. England had no public school system, and apparently cared nothing about the wretched condition of ignorance which existed among the people of the slums.

In Italy, Mrs. Browning had a splendid opportunity to learn what other nations thought of England's position as a world power. In "A Song for the Ragged Schools of London", she said she heard that England was strong and could command Czars. England was rich because she had great supplies of coal and wood, and she was righteous because "her wealth of golden coins works the welfare of the nations." But across the Alps, a louder voice reached Mrs. Browning's ears, one which drowned out the words of praise and said, "England's cruel, save us some of these poor victims in her keeping."

VI

"Comes that voice. Let others shout,
Other poets praise my land here:
I am sadly sitting out,
Praying, 'God forgive her grandeur'"



VII

"Shall we boast of empires, where
Time with ruin sits commissioned?
In God's liberal blue air
Peter's dome itself ends wizened;"

IX

"Lordly English, think it o'er
Caesar's doing is all undone!
You have cannon on your shore,
And free Parliaments in London;"

X

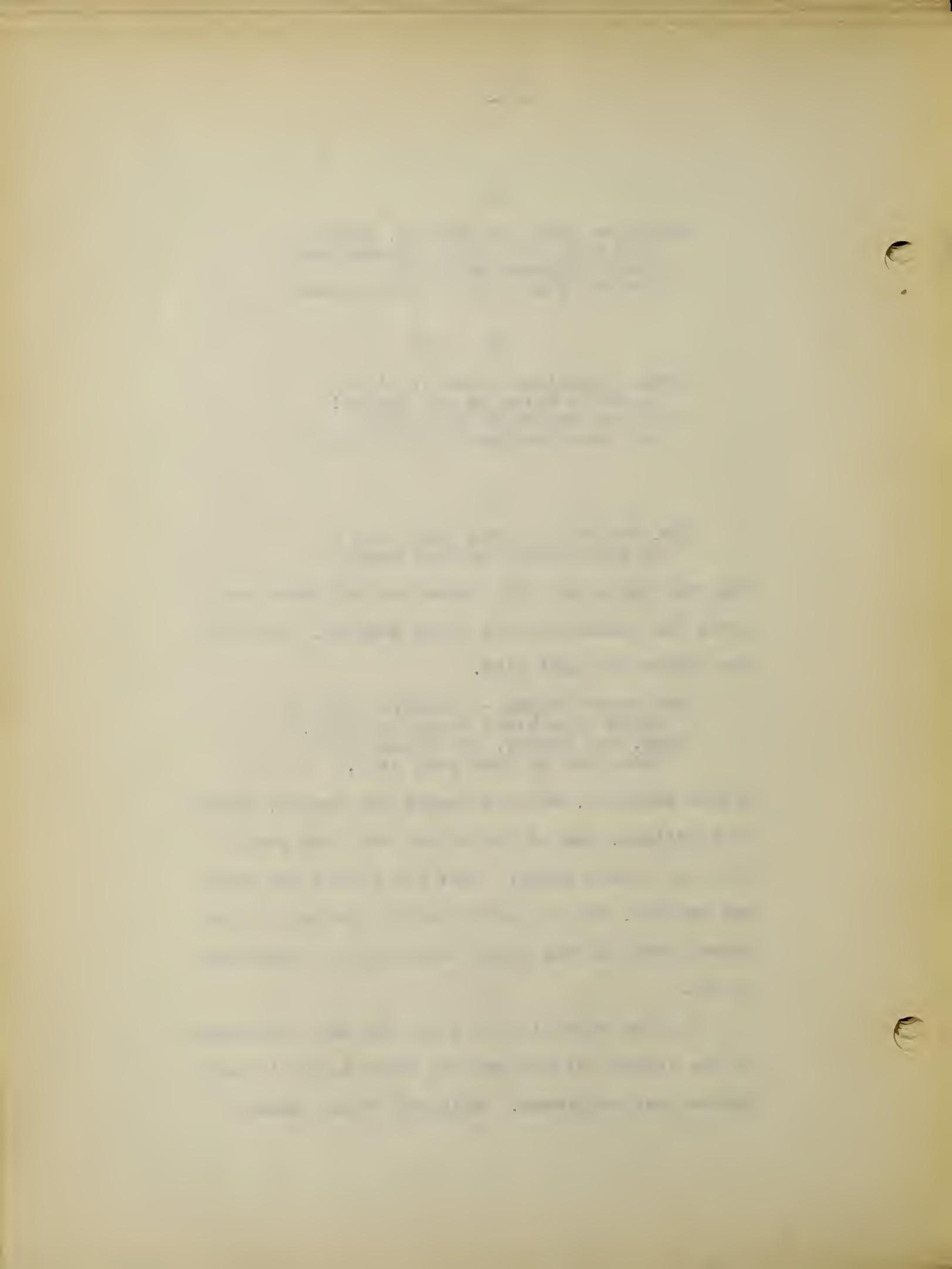
"Ay, but ruins worse than Rome's
In your pauper men and women."

She goes on to say that these men and women can speak for themselves and curse England, but there are others who need pity.

"But these others -- children small,
Spilt like blots about the city,
Quay, and street, and palace-wall
Take them up into your pity!"

Little children, who are ragged and hungry, huddle on doorsteps, beg in the alleys and then gamble with the stolen penny. Some are sickly and some are healthy, but all are "staring through at the brown loaves of the baker" starving for something to eat.

At this point in the poem, she was influenced by the thought of her own son whose birth in 1849 crowned her happiness. Thinking of her sweet,



golden-headed, ten year old son she sobs,

"Can we bear the sweet looks of our own
children,

XXIII

While those others, lean and small,
Scurf and milden of the city,
Spot our streets, convict us all
Till we take them into pity?"

If the nation can't feed or clothe the children,
at least they can put something in their hearts
and minds to bear their struggle.

XXVIII

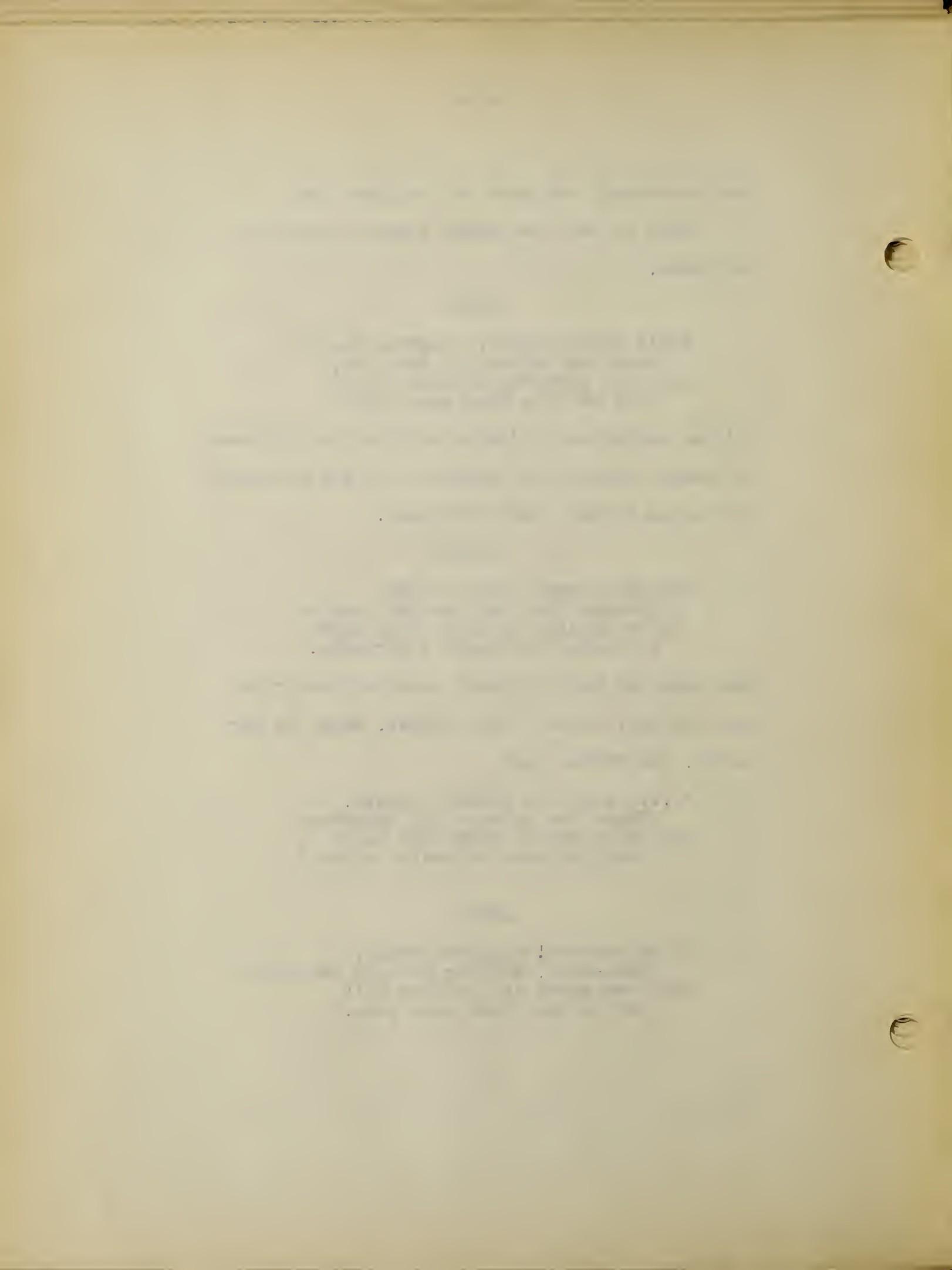
"On the dismal London flags
Through the cruel social juggle
Put a thought beneath their rage
To enoble the heart's struggle."

She does not ask for these children nearly as
much as she, or any other mother, asks for her
child, but rather just

"....a place in Ragged Schools,
Where the outcast may tomorrow
Learn by gentle words and rules
Just the uses of their sorrow."

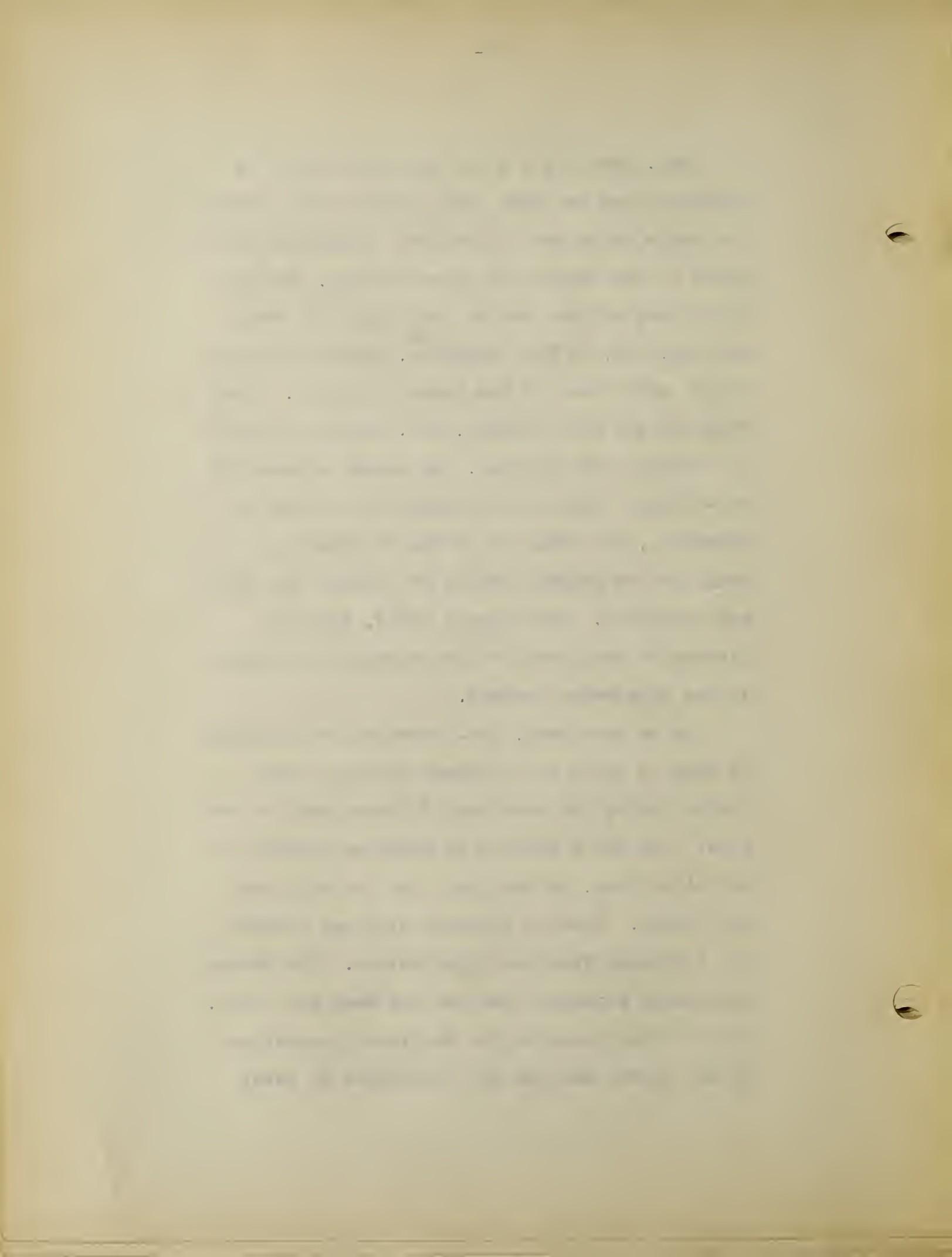
XXXII

"O my sisters! children small,
Blue-eyed, wailing through the city--
Our own babes cry in them all:
Let us take them into pity."



Mrs. Browning did not let her loyalty to England blind her eyes, and keep her from seeing the evils which were tolerated. England might be great in the thought of other nations, the English might be generous to the people of other nations, but, to Mrs. Browning, England and her people were cruel to the pauper children. When humanity was down-trodden, Mrs. Browning ceased to be frail and retiring, and became strong and out-spoken. Many of her poems are obscure and fantastic, but "The Cry of the Children" and "A Song for the Ragged Schools of London" are clear and realistic. They give a vivid, truthful picture of two social evils existing in England in the nineteenth century.

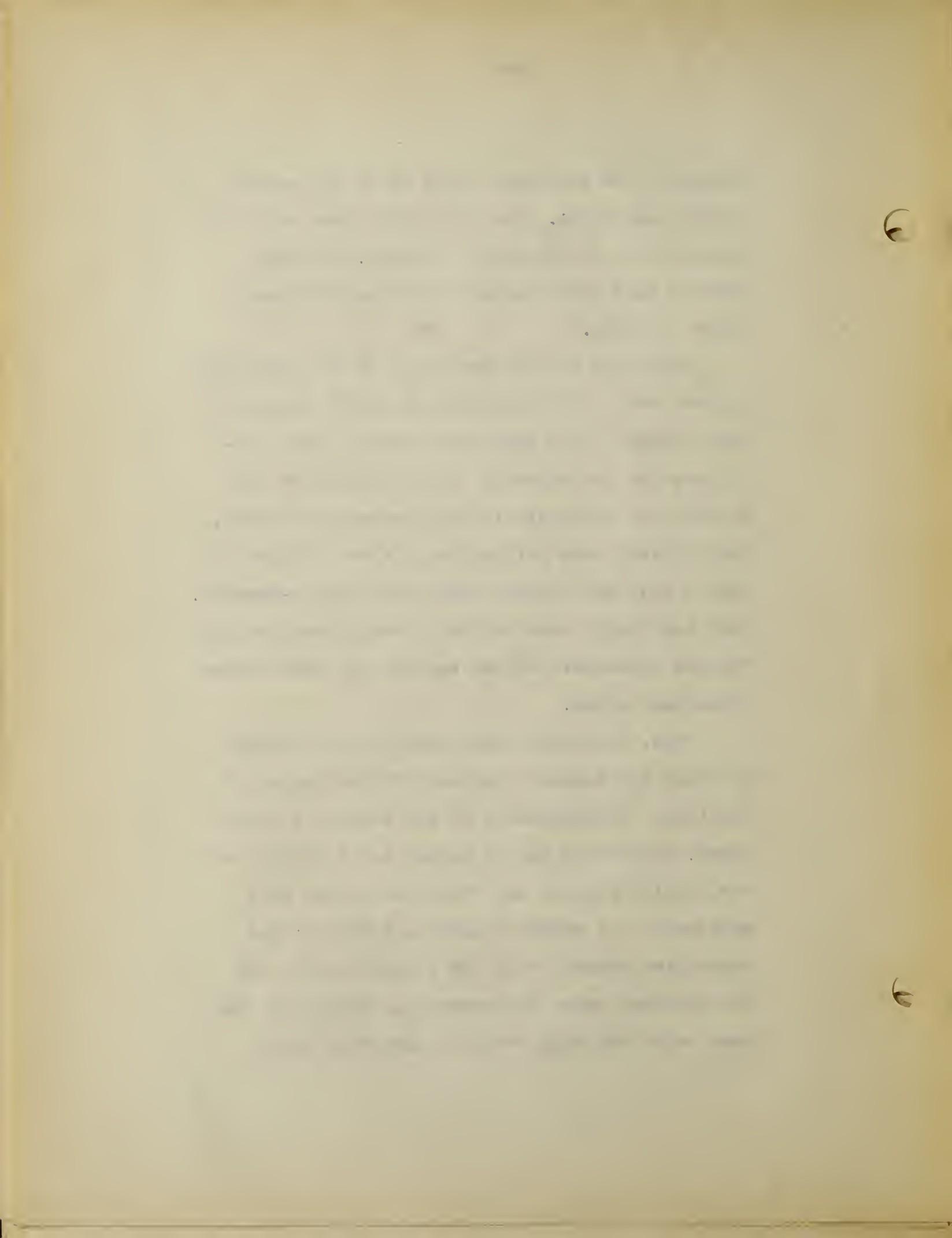
As we have seen, Mrs. Browning left England in 1846 to which she returned only for short visits during the remaining fifteen years of her life. She had a faculty of adapting herself to new situations, so that her life in Italy was very happy. Life in Florence with her husband was a release from many oppressions. She became physically stronger than she had been for years. She no longer endured the obstinate domination of her father and she was surrounded by loyal



friends. The Brownings lived in an old palace called Casa Guidi. They left this home only for short visits to France and England, but the greater part of the remainder of her life was spent in Italy.

Now Italy in the first half of the nineteenth century was torn with political strife which always brings in its wake unfortunate social conditions for the majority of individuals of the country and particularly for the poorer classes. The Italians were putting forth a vain effort to obtain only what should have been theirs--freedom. They had fought hard but had accomplished nothing, for the first half of the century was over before Italy was united.

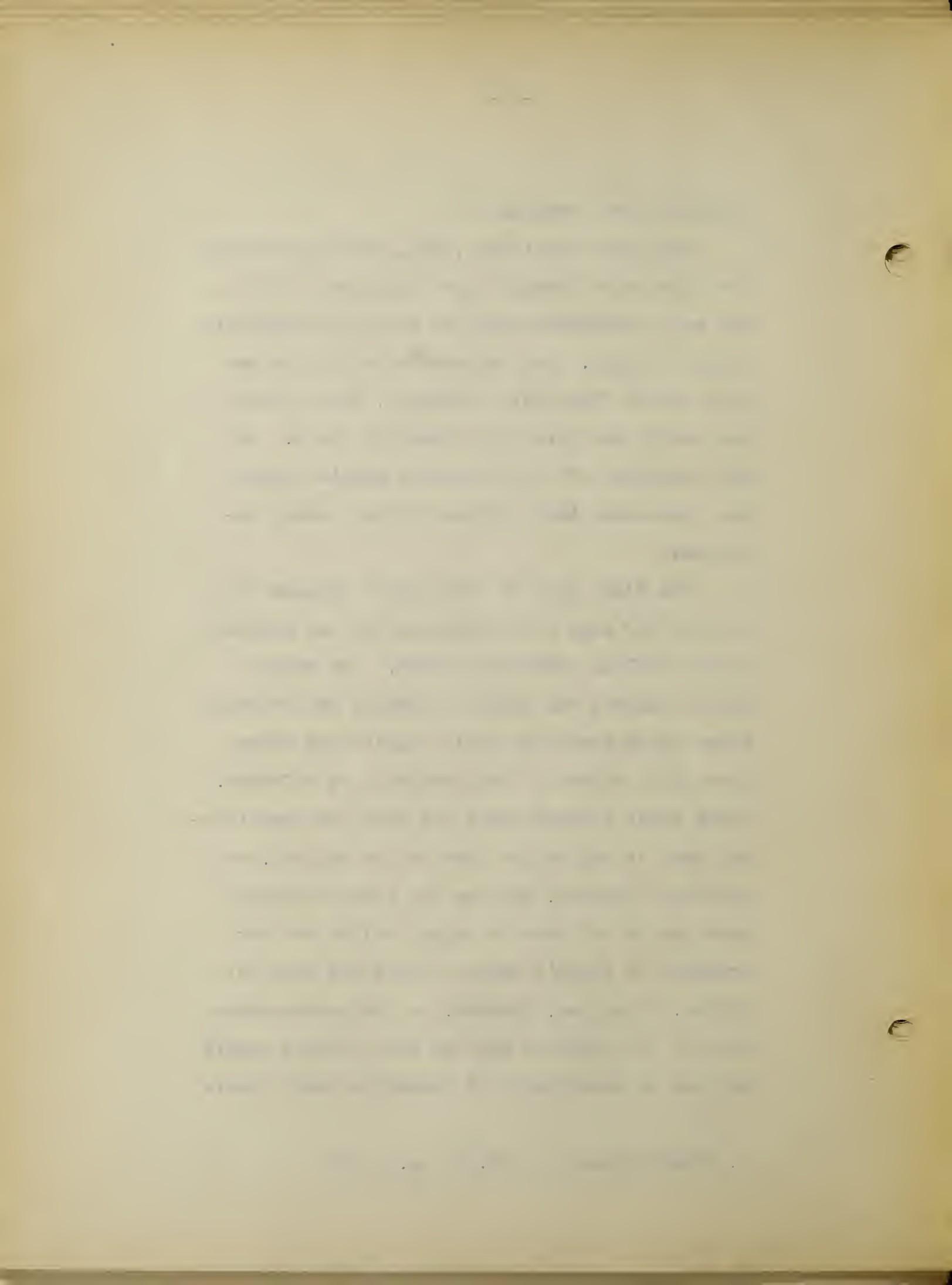
"Mrs. Browning's more than filial devotion to Italy has become a portion of the history of our time. Independently of her husband's enthusiasm, everything in the aspect and condition of the adopted country was fitted to arouse this sentiment. It became a passion with her; she identified herself with the Italian cause, and for fourteen years her oratory in Casa Guidi was vocal with the aspiration of that fair land



struggling for freedom." 1.

From Casa Guidi then, Mrs. Browning watched the courageous struggles and consequent defeats. She was alternately thrilled and heartbroken with Italy's plight. Her impression is left in her poem called "Casa Guidi Windows", which shows how deeply she loved this trampled Italy. As her knowledge of the distressed people around her increased, her interest in their cause increased.

The first part of "Casa Guidi Windows" is full of the hope and enthusiasm for the success of the Italian uprising in 1848. The second part expresses the sorrow of defeat and bondage. Poems which deal with social conditions often lose their appeal as the condition is reformed. "Casa Guidi Windows" does not have the appeal today that it had at the time of the writing, not even for Italians, because the situation which gave use to her song no longer exists and her prophecy of Italy's bright future has been fulfilled. The poem, however, is a sincere expression of the sympathy for the poor Italian people who had no opportunity of improving their condi-



tions. They must do as the petty rulers command or die.

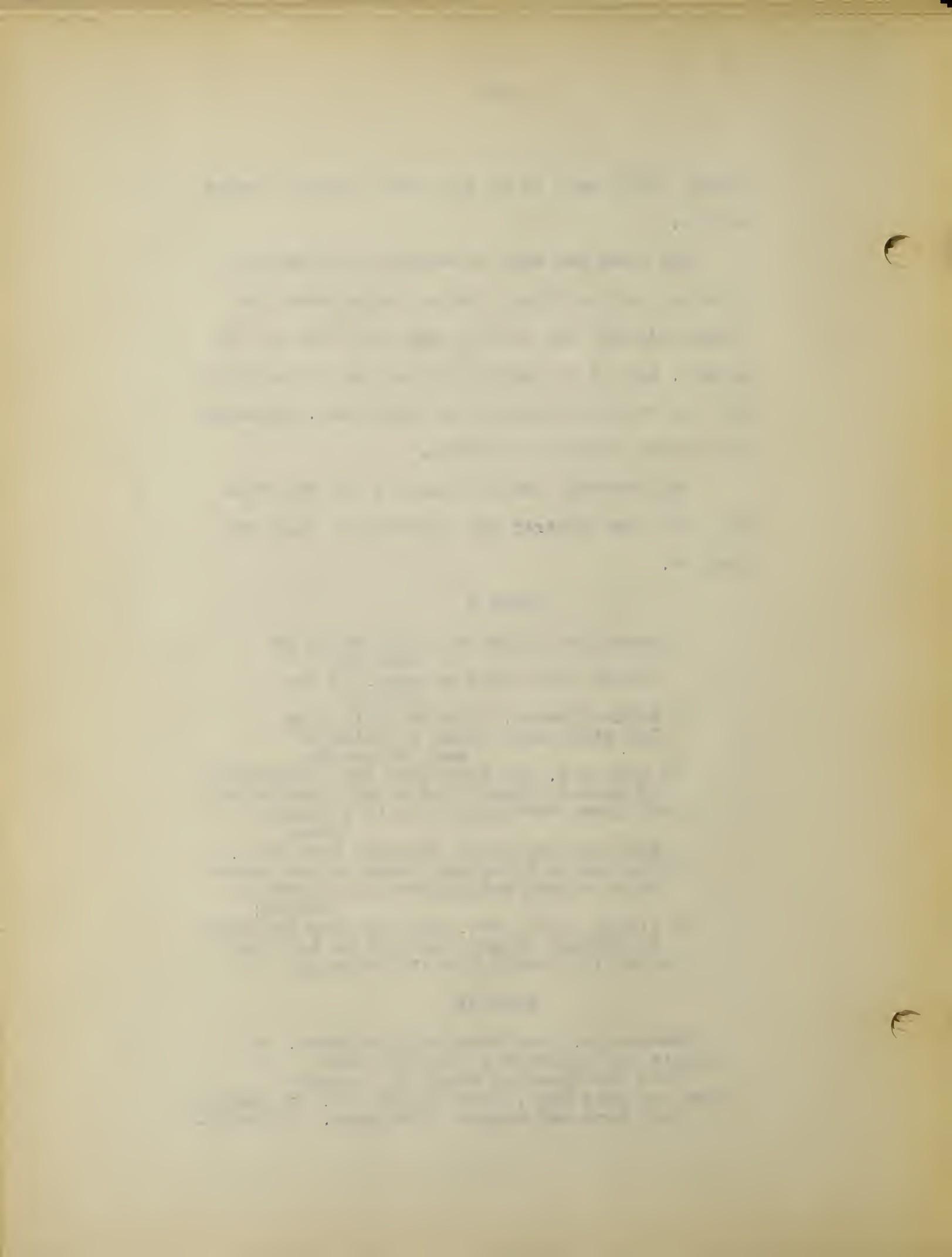
The poem has many allusions to Florentine literary and political history which show how completely she had studied into the life of the people, but it is confusing when one is searching for the definite impressions which Mrs. Browning had of the fight for freedom.

Two stanzas, one from Part I and one from Part II, show clearly the contrast of hope and despair.

Part I

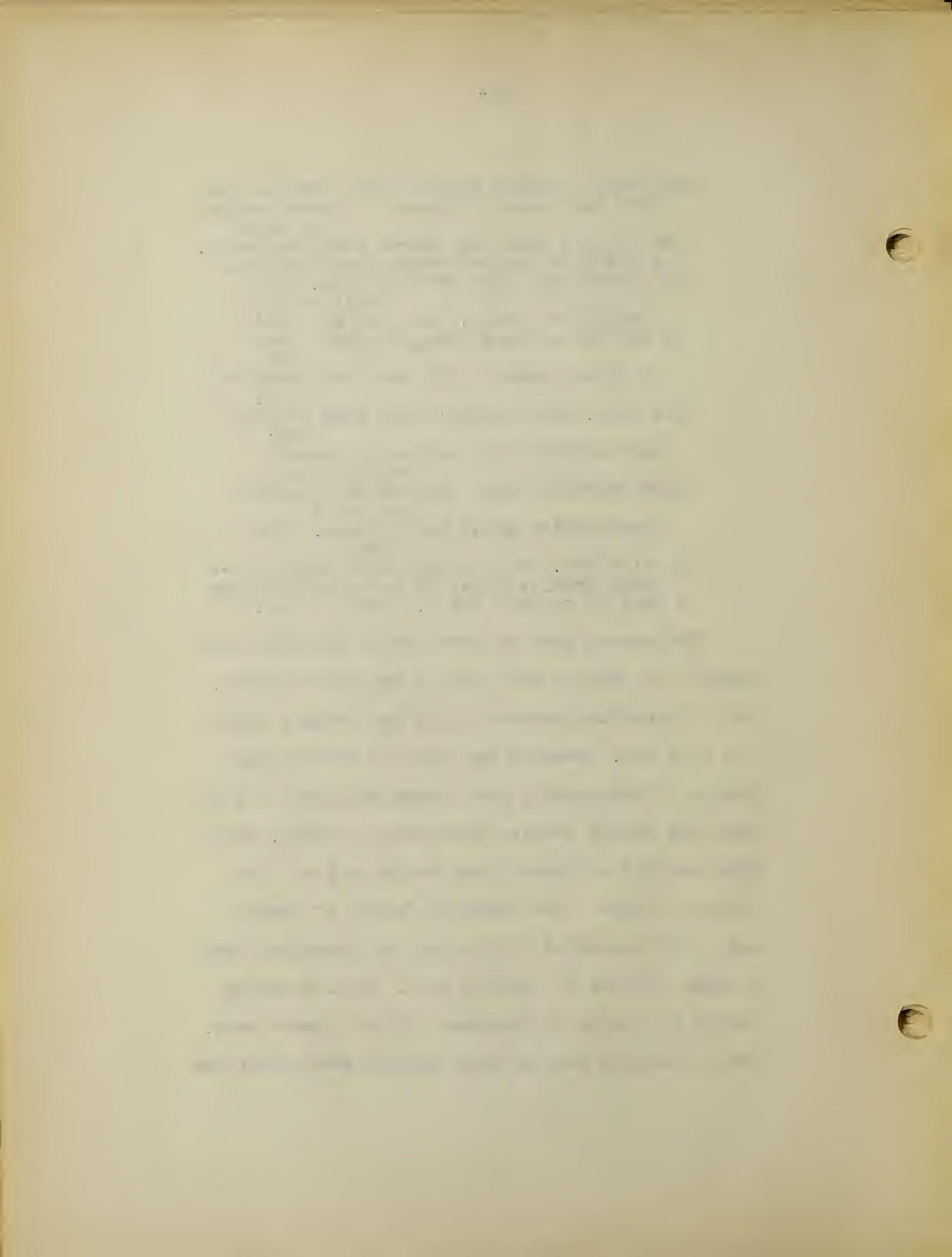
Part II

"Meanwhile, from Casa Guidi windows, we
Beheld the armament of Austria flow
 Into the drowning heart of Tuscany:
And yet none wept, none cursed, or, if 'twas so
 They wept and cursed in silence. Silently."



"Our noisy Tuscans watched the invading foe;
They had learnt silence. Pressed against
the well,
And grouped upon the church steps opposite,
A few pale men and women stared at all.
God knows what they were feeling, with
their white
Constrained faces, they, so prodigal
Of cry and gesture when the world goes
right,
Or wrong indeed. But here was depth of
wrong,
And here, still water; they were silent
here;
And through that sentient silence,
struck along
That measured tramp from which it stood
out clear
Distinct the sound and silence, like
a gong
At midnight, each by the other awfuller,--
While every soldier in his cap displayed
A leaf of olive. Dusty, bitter thing!"

The second part of "Casa Guidi Windows" was written in 1851 at the time of the great defeat, and it therefore carried in it the intense feeling that Mrs. Browning had for the disappointed people. Fortunately, Mrs. Browning lived to witness the second Italian revolution in 1859, when Napoleon III of France came to the aid of the Italian people. The combined forces of France and Italy succeeded in driving the Austrians from a large portion of Italian soil. Mrs. Browning placed her faith in Napoleon III as a great hero, and stubbornly held to that opinion even after the

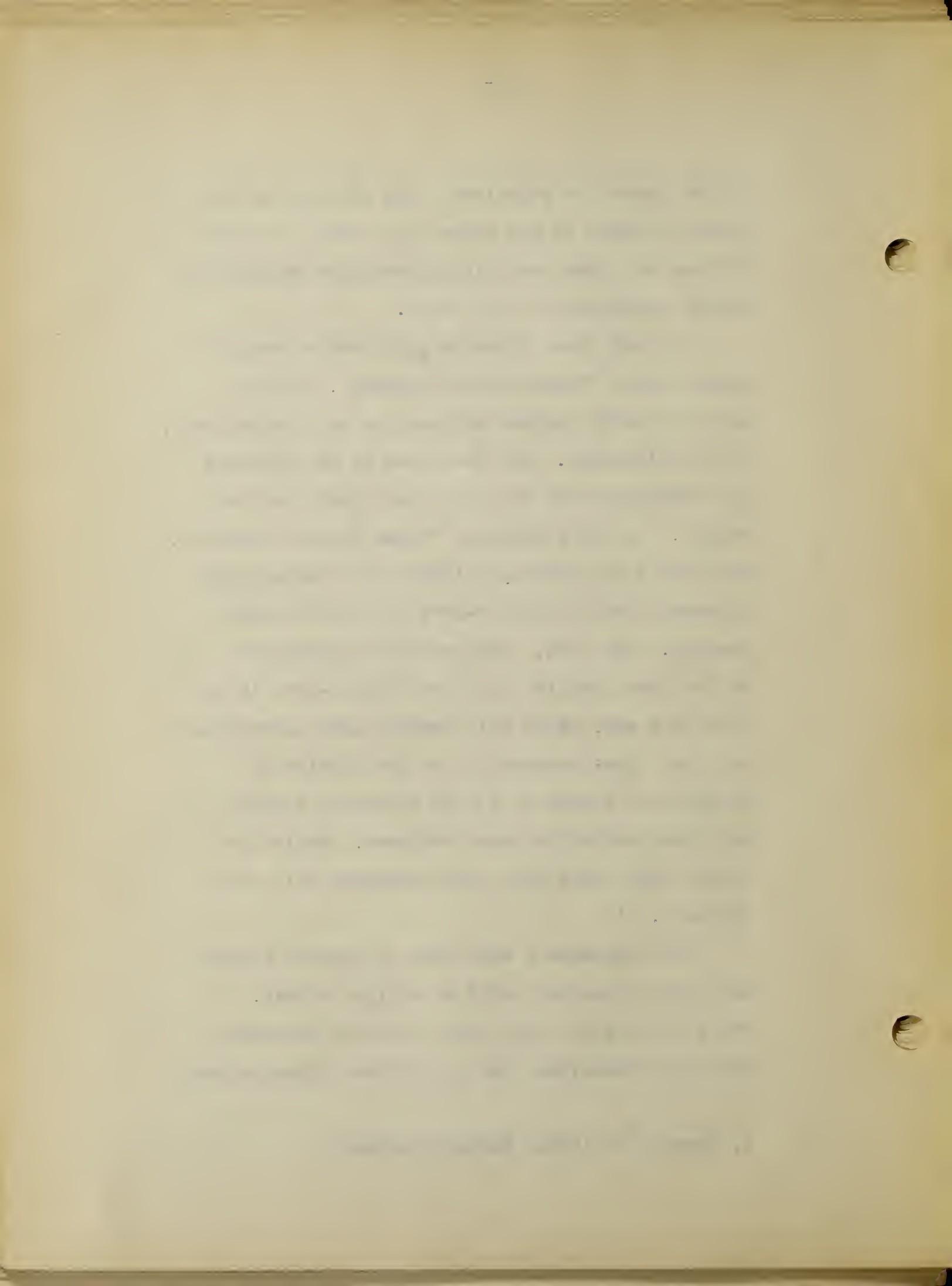


sudden treaty in July 1859. She admired the Emperor for what he did before the treaty, and she refused to alter her opinion even when England was openly suspicious of his plans.

In 1860, Mrs. Browning published a group of poems called "Poems Before Congress", two of which directly express her opinion on international relationships. The two poems to be discussed are "Napoleon III" in Italy" and "Italy and the World". In the preface to "Poems Before Congress", she states her position clearly and courageously by openly criticising England for her cold neutrality. She said, "Nationality is excellent in its place and the instinct of self-love is the root of a man, which will develop into sacrificial virtues. Non-intervention in the affairs of neighboring states is a high political virtue; but non-intervention does not mean, passing by on the other side when your neighbors fall among thieves".¹.

She expressed a wish that an English statesman would arise who would be willing to say, "This is good for your trade; this is necessary for your demination: but it will vex a people hard

1. Preface to "Poems Before Congress"



by; it will hurt a people father off, it will profit nothing to the general humanity: therefore, away with it! it is not for you or for me." ^{1.}

This quotation brings out emphatically, and in her own words, her very strong interest in the social welfare of humanity because it was more important to her than patriotism. Nations should be interested in the conditions of the people of the world and not their own personal gain. She felt that Napoleon III was interested in helping the people of Italy and so she wrote the poem, "Napoleon III in Italy". She idealized and glorified the Emperor she imagined Napoleon III to be in these lines:

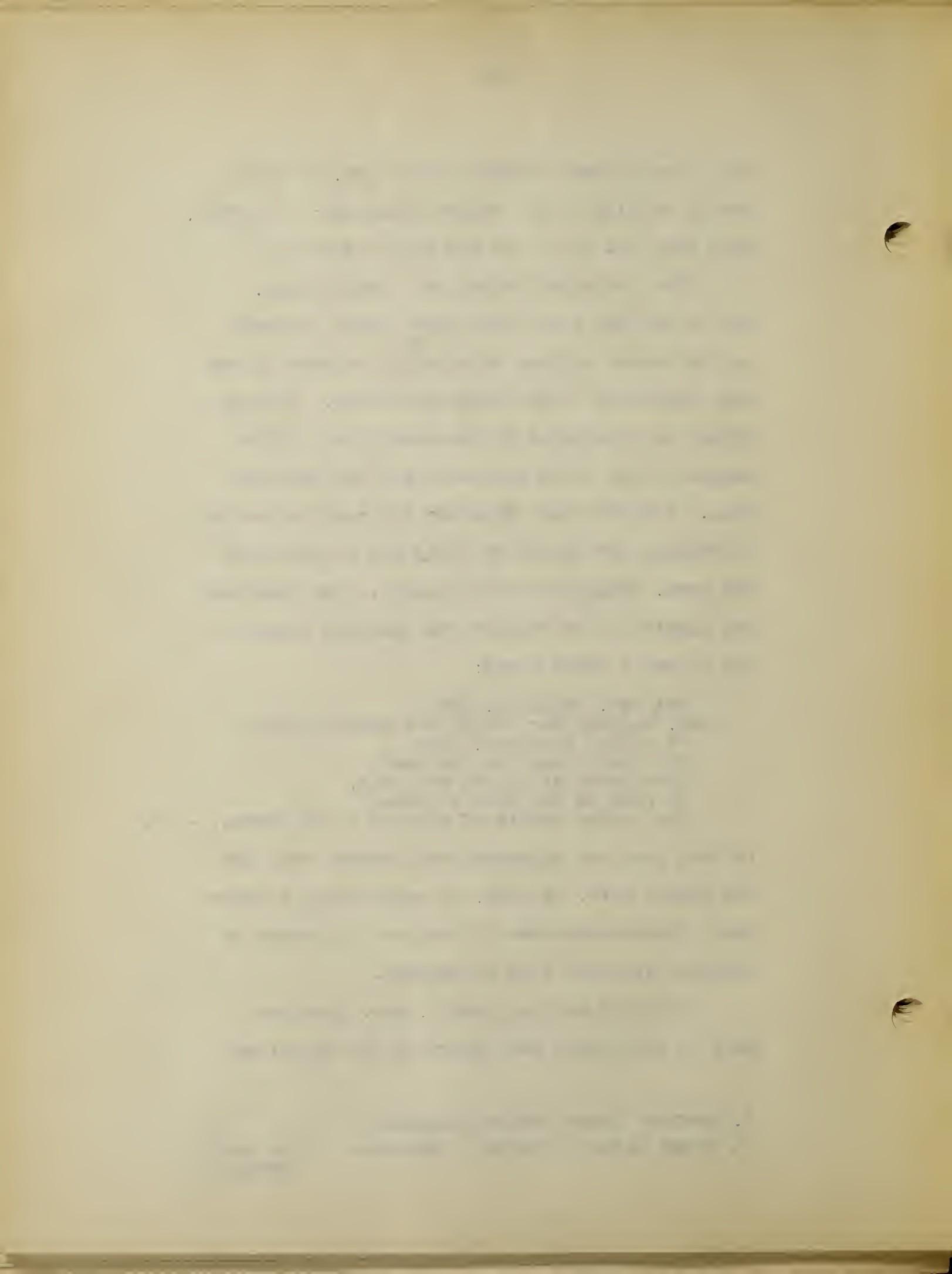
"But now, Napoleon, now
That, leaving far behind the purple throng
Of vulgar monarchs, thou
Treadest higher in thy deed
Than stair of throne can lead,
To help in the hour of wrong
The broken hearts of nations to be strong.--" ^{2.}

In this poem she expresses the thought that now the people have, at last, an opportunity to gain their freedom--because one man was believing in humanity stronger than in Empires.

In "Italy and the World", Mrs. Browning gave in one stanza her theory of the social re-

1. Preface "Poems Before Congress"

2. Poems Before Congress - Napoleon III in Italy
Stanza II



lationship of peoples.

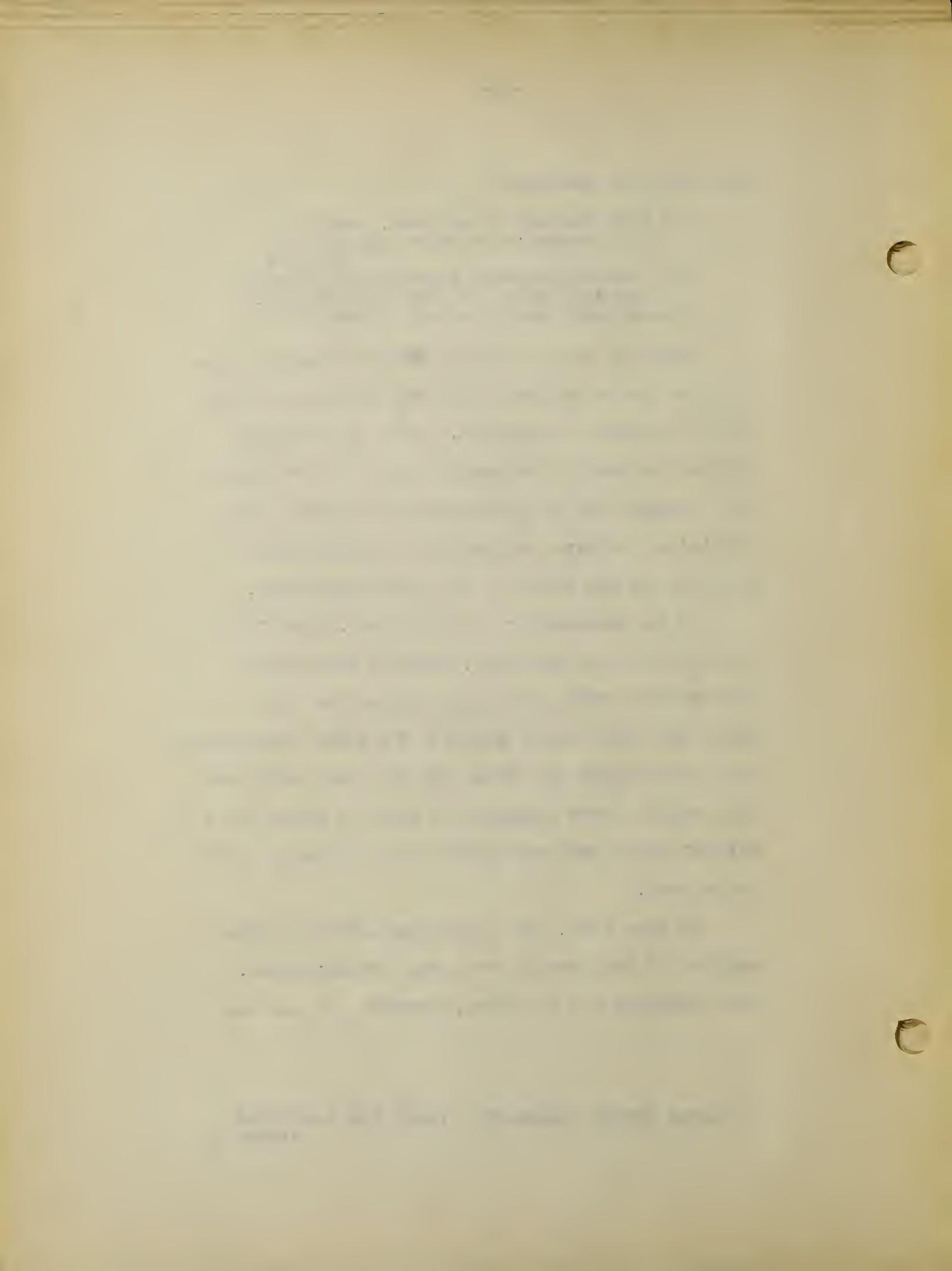
"No more Jew nor Greek then, taunting
Nor taunted;--no more England nor
France!
But one confederate brotherhood planting
One flag only, to mark the advance,
Onward and upward, of all humanity." 1.

Included also in "Poems Before Congress" was "A Curse for a Nation" which was written to help abolish slavery in America. Mrs. Browning was honored in America by groups who tried to obtain her co-operation in philanthropic schemes. The Abolitionists were successful in arousing her sympathy in the cause of the oppressed negro.

It is interesting to notice Mrs. Browning's reaction to this question, because the Barretts were wealthy West India land-owners and that meant that they owned slaves. With her characteristic fearlessness she faced the problem openly and as a result there appeared in 1845 "A Curse for a Nation" which was published in the "Liberty Bell" in America.

In this poem, she prophesied strife within America if this social evil was not abolished. Mrs. Browning did not live, however, to see her

1. Poems Before Congress - Italy and the World
Stanza X

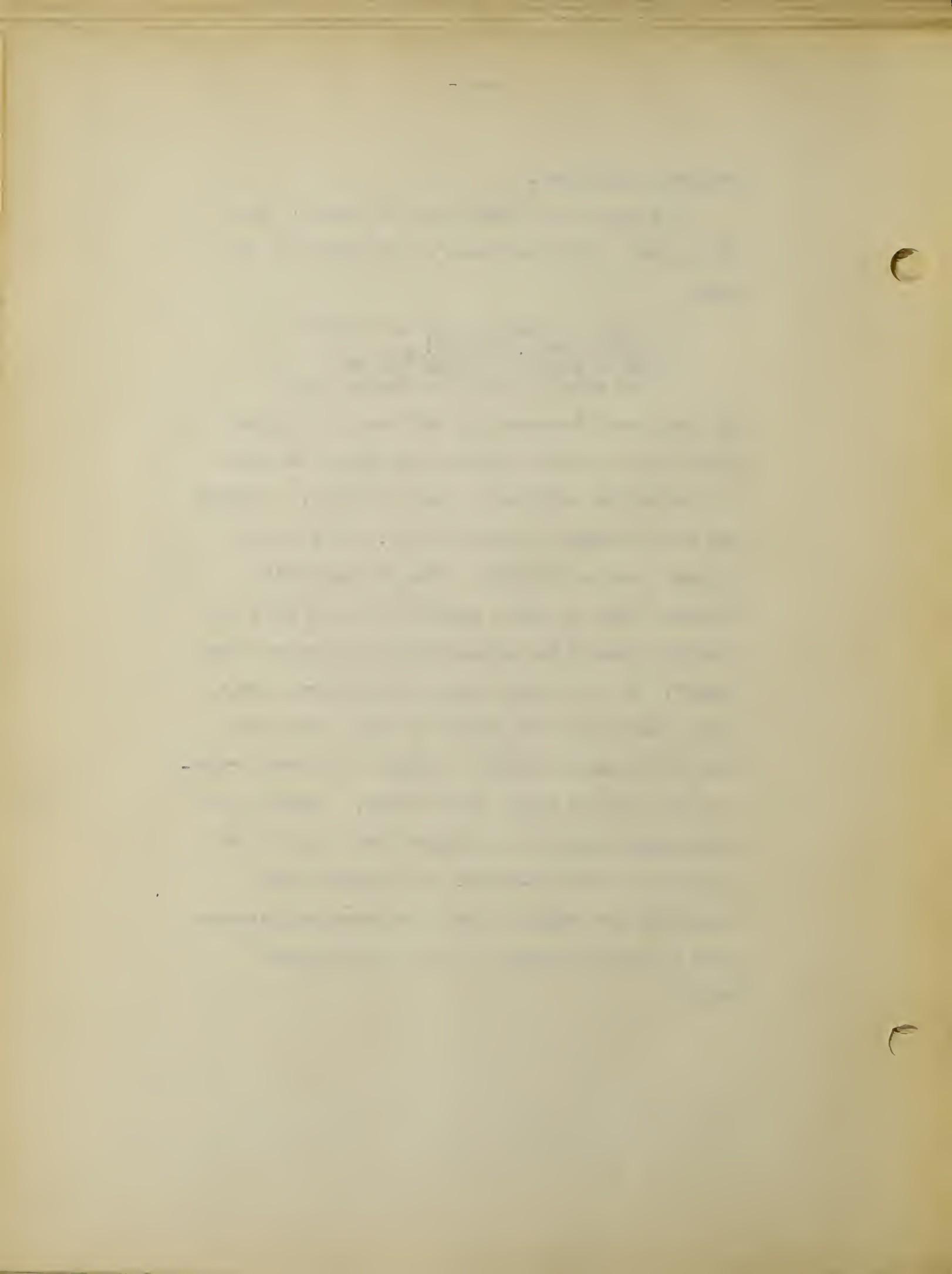


prophecy fulfilled.

The poem is divided into two parts; the "Prologue", and "The Curse". The Prologue begins,

"I heard an angle speak last night,
And he said, 'Write!
Write a Nation's curse for me
And send it over the Western Sea'"

She hesitated because she was bound to friends across that sea and because her heart was sore for suffering children in her own land. England had evils enough to write about, how could she condemn another country? She was persuaded, however, that it was a woman's duty to help to abolish slavery and consequently she wrote "The Curse". In this part she warns Americans that while they watch the evils in other countries they will blush with the thought of a more crushing evil within their own country. America can only remain silent and "plant your flag in the sun beside the ill-doers! And recoil from clutching the curse of God's witnessing Universe with a curse of yours - This is the curse.
Write."

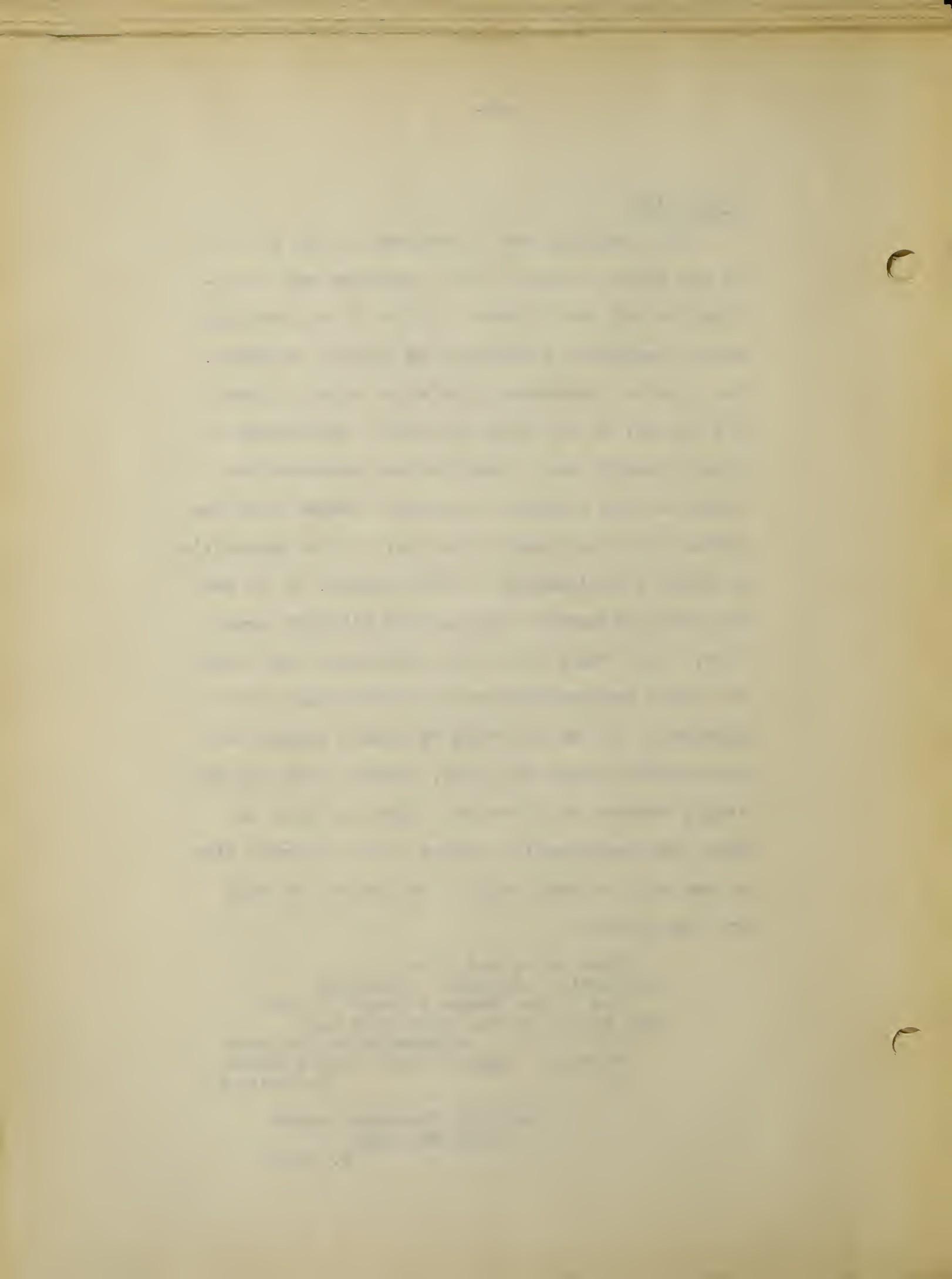


Conclusion

Mrs. Browning was in advance of her period in her social theories, and therefore was criticised by her own friends because of her attitude toward England's neutrality in Italy's struggle. She lived a cloistered life which made it possible for her to sit back and take a world-view of social conditions. A world-view broadened her ideas so that humanity in general became more important than any race or nation. It is impossible to doubt the sincerity of her purpose, or to feel that she was merely striving for literary prestige. This was a cause into which she had thrown her whole personality against forces many times stronger. No one in Italy felt more deeply for the crushed people than Mrs. Browning and she was highly revered by Florence. When she died in 1861, the municipality placed a white marble slab on the wall of Casa Guidi. In letters of gold are the words:--

"Here wrote and died,
Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Who in her Woman's heart quieted
The wisdom of the sages and the
eloquence of the past
With her golden verse linking Italy
to England.

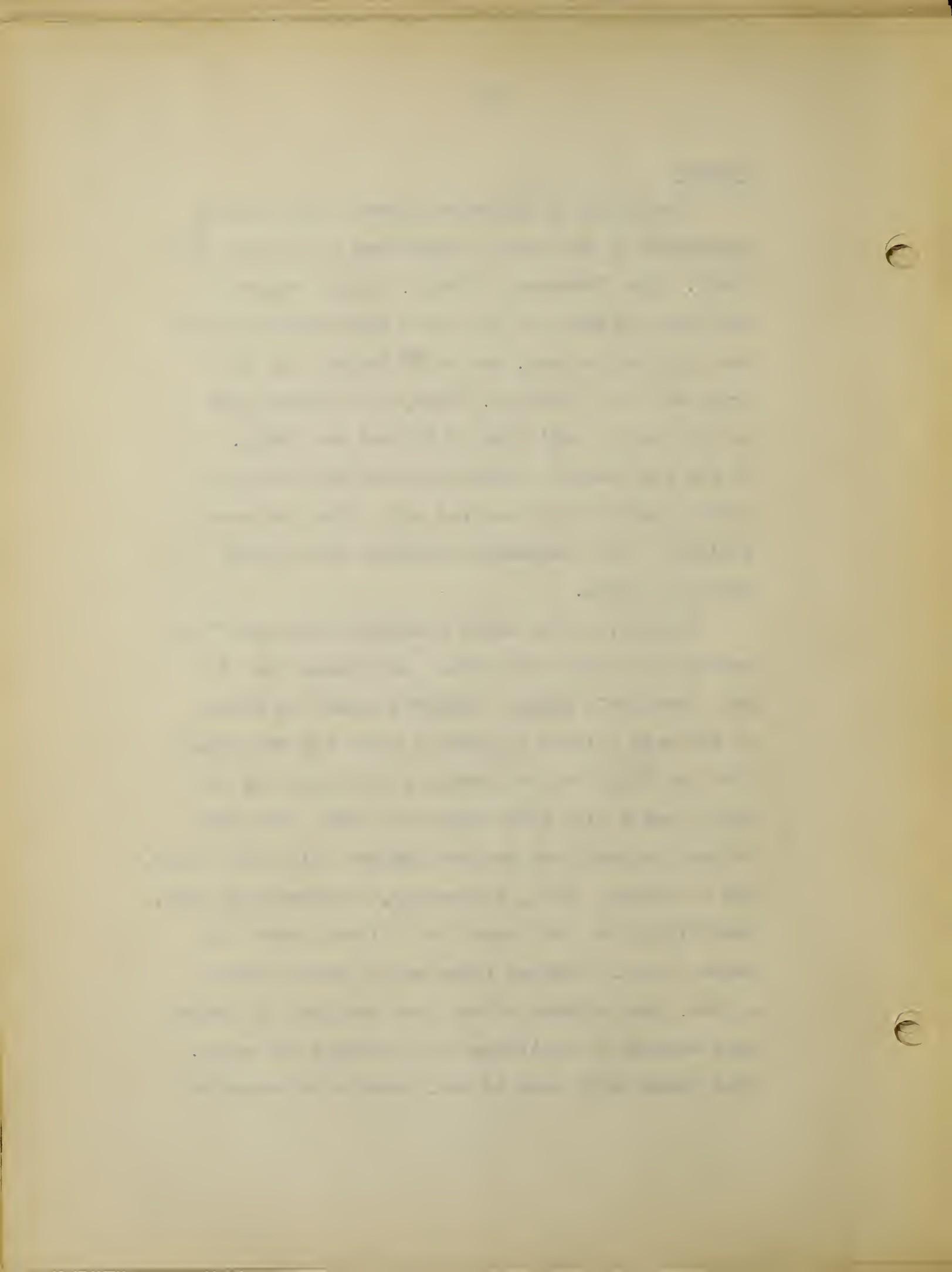
Grateful Florence placed
This Memorial
A. D. 1861 "



Summary

The poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning was influenced by the social conditions of England and Italy. Mrs. Browning, a frail, quiet, reserved and retiring woman of the early nineteenth century was a versatile poet, but on no subject did she write with more feeling, vigor, and boldness than on the social conditions of England and Italy. If she was obscure in dealing with abstract subjects, she certainly was not with these concrete subjects. She succeeded in making her opinions perfectly clear.

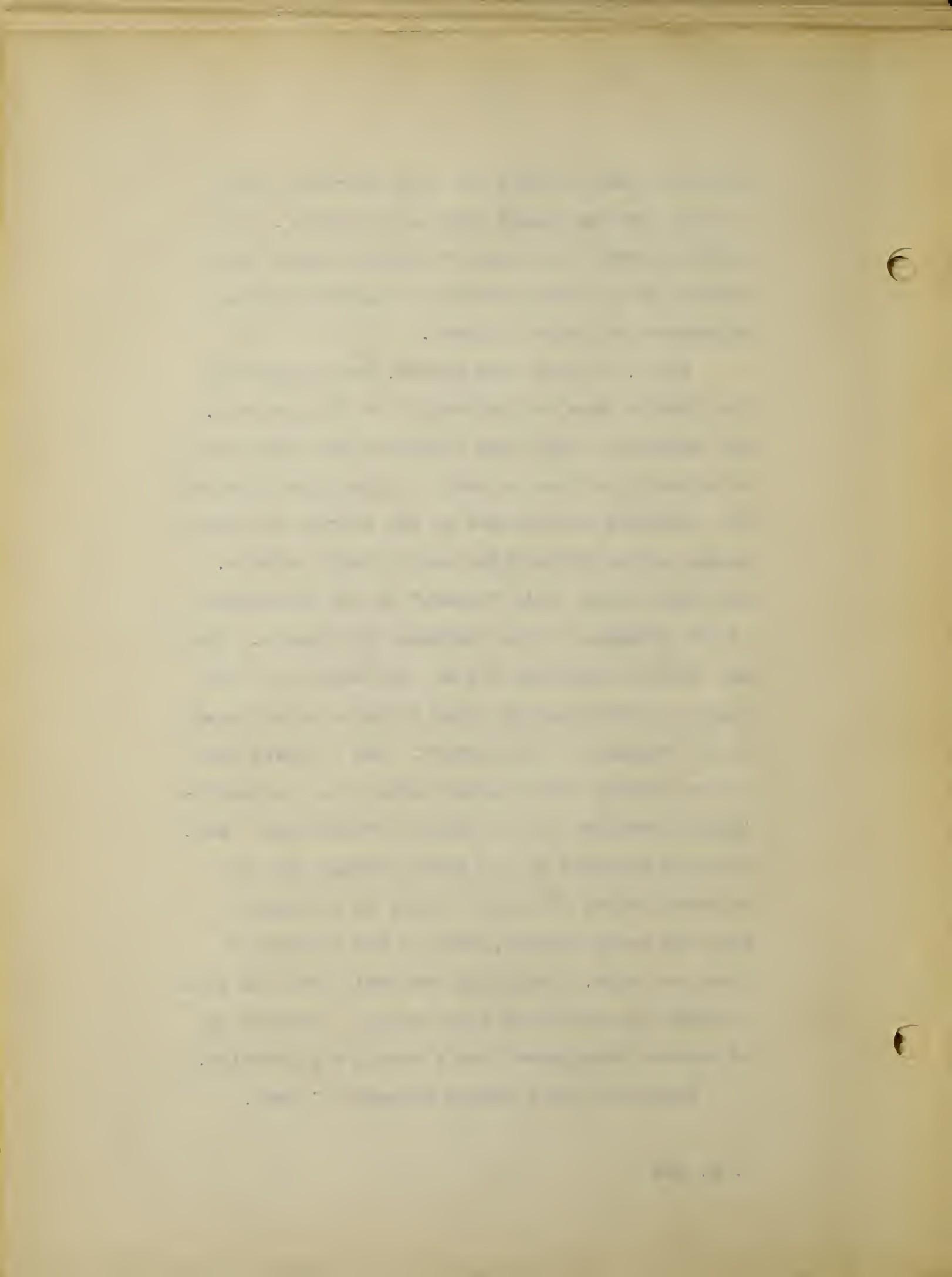
England, in the early nineteenth century, tolerated two social evils which influenced two of Mrs. Browning's poems. Children under ten years of age were allowed to work in mines and factories with the filthiest of working conditions, and the result was a high child mortality rate. "The Cry of the Children" was written against this social evil, and it brought about, indirectly, Parliamentary Acts. prohibiting the employment of children under ten years of age. Because there was no public school system, the children of the poor sections of London were exposed to conditions of ignorance and crime. This social evil came to Mrs. Browning's attention



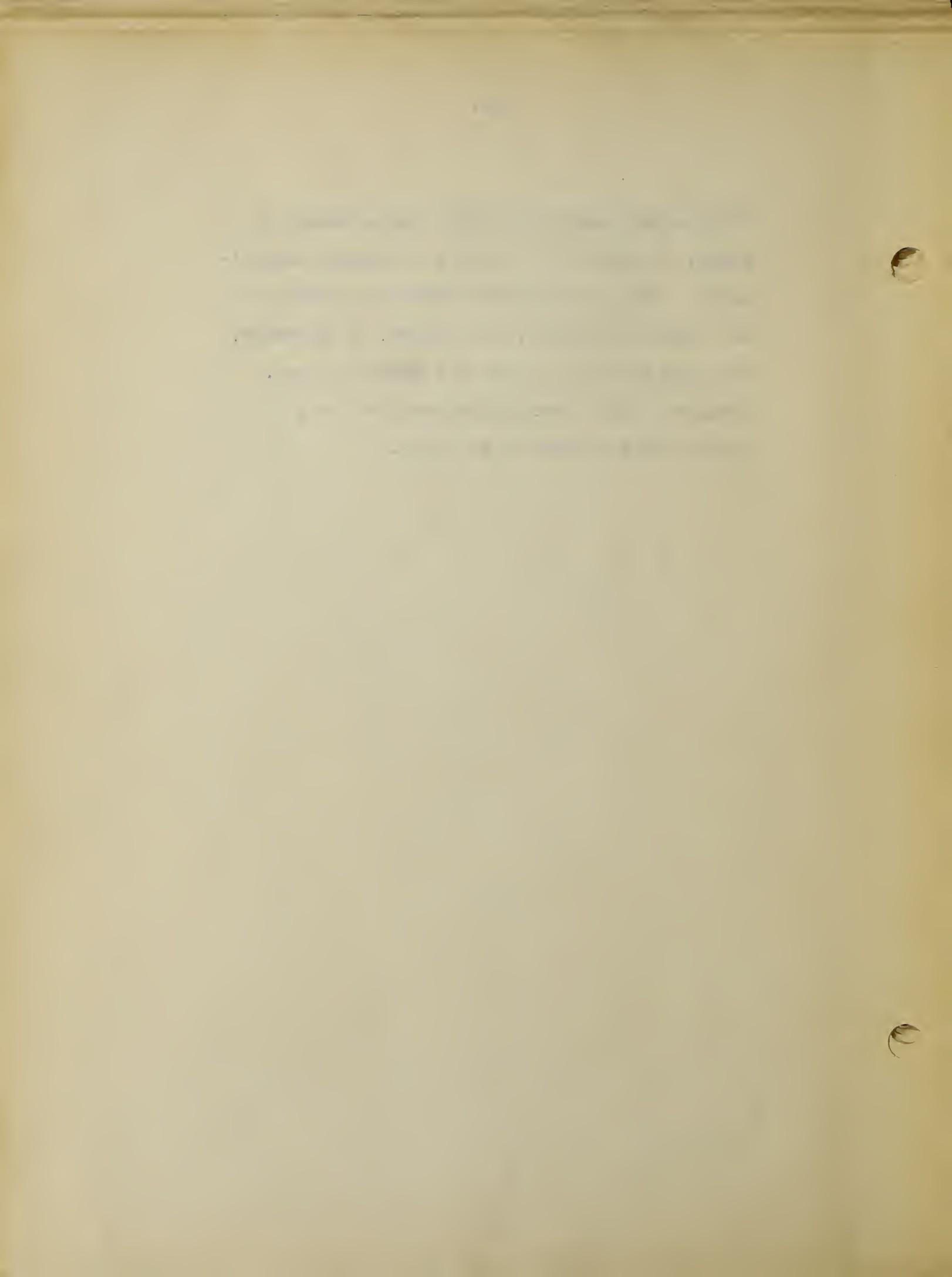
while she was in Italy and from there she wrote "A Song for the Ragged Schools of London". She hoped to shock the women of England into a realization of the harm that was being done to the characters of these children.

Italy, in this same period, was struggling for freedom from the oppression of foreign rule. The people of Italy were suffering from the social evils which go hand in hand with political strife. Mrs. Browning was stirred by the courage of these people and suffered with them in their defeats. She wrote "Casa Guidi Windows" as her impression of the struggle of the Italians for freedom. She had faith in Napoleon III as the rescuer of this group of people and as proof of her admiration she wrote "Napoleon III in Italy". She believed that he was helping the Italians because he was unselfishly interested in the welfare of humanity. Mrs. Browning believed in the social theory that the stronger groups of people should be willing to help the weaker groups, even at the expense of their own gain. "Italy and the World" was the poem in which she expressed this theory. Humanity is of greater importance than a nation's prosperity.

Hamilton in his "Women Writers" ^{l.} says,



"George MacDonald calls her 'the princess of poets; in idea she is noble, in phrase magnificent.' We are continually meeting scraps of her poems in sermons, and essays, in speeches, whenever we wish to stir the hearts of men. Those who learn from her cannot but feel ennobled and elevated by so doing."



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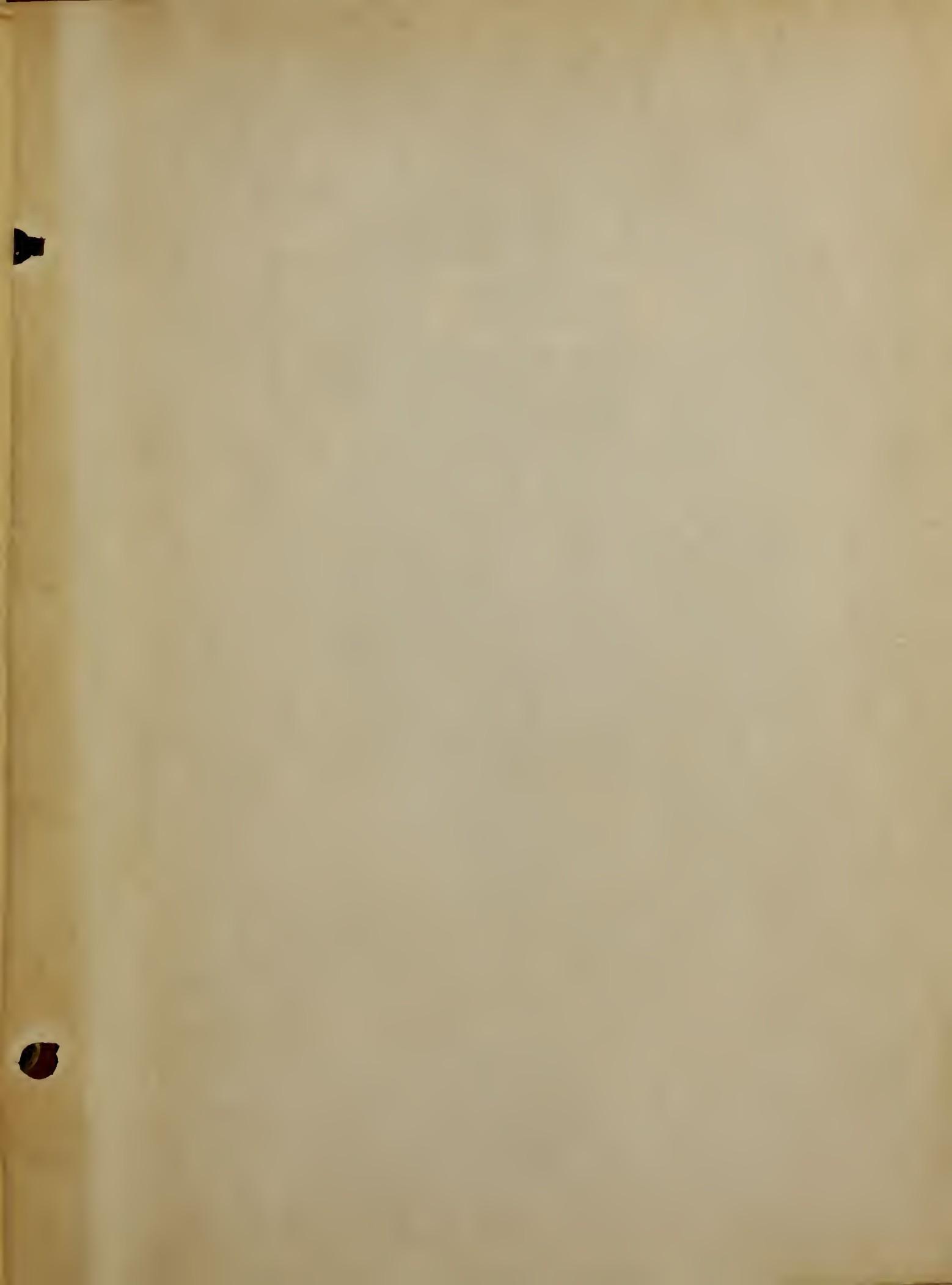
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

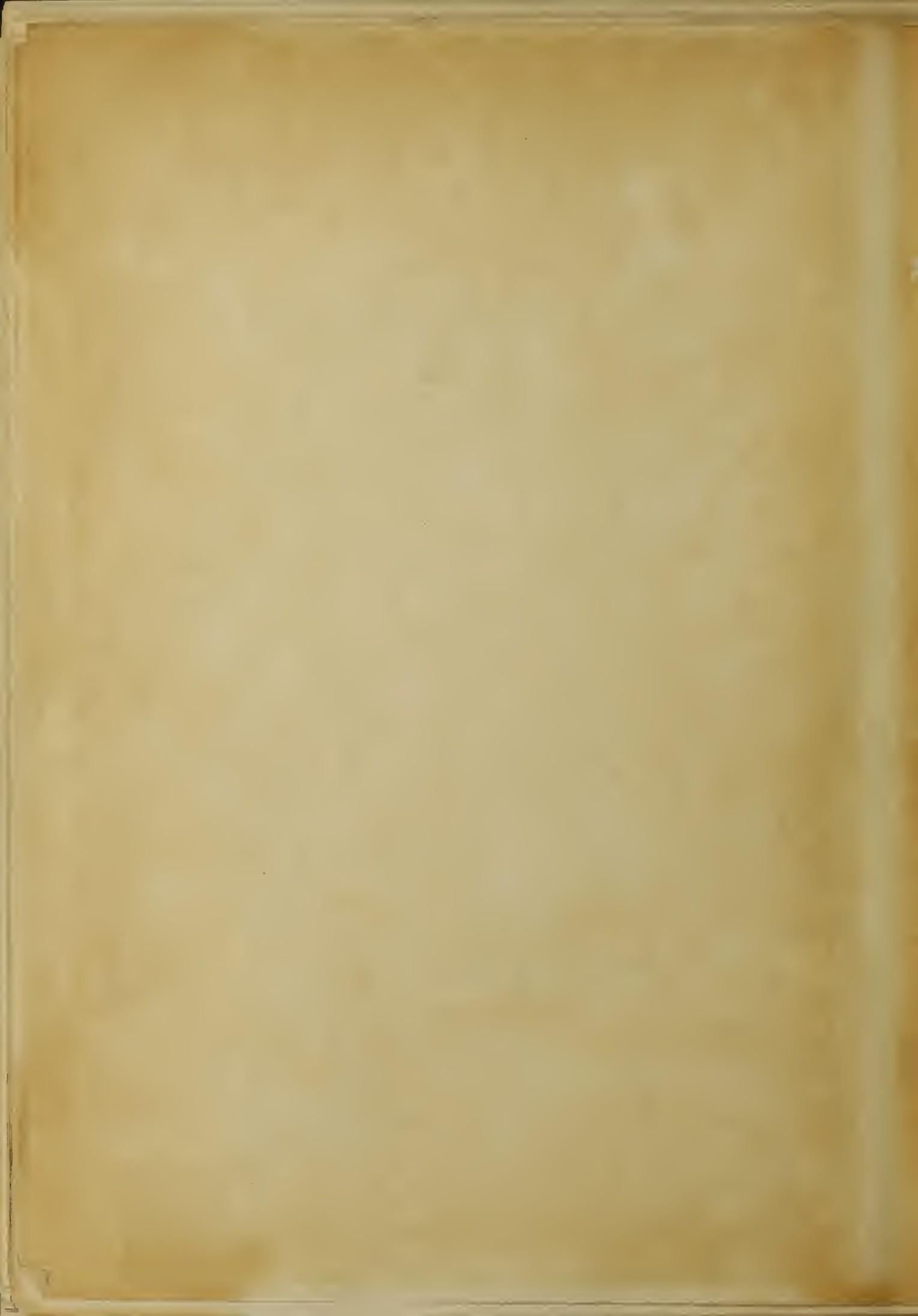
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